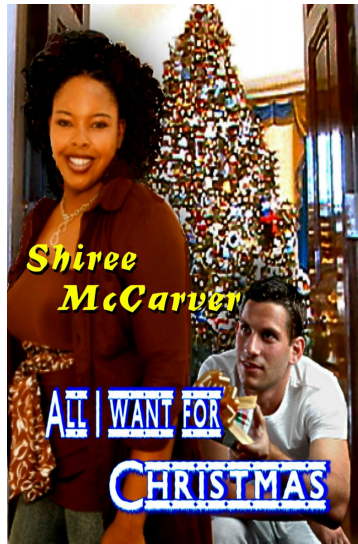


All I Want For Christmas



ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS

Shiree McCarver

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Shiree McCarver

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THE LORD AND THE SCORPION

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CHAPTER ONE

“I don't care if it's two weeks before Christmas! Somebody has to be working in this city this week, besides me. You think I can run this advertising firm, employing hundreds of people—forty percent being from your agency, I might add—and it be okay for me to take two freakin' weeks off before Christmas?” He paused to listen to the party on phone line and laughed aloud. “Okay, so *I am* taking two weeks off before Christmas, but hey, I take my work with me.”

Alec Mercer rolled his eyes heavenward as, Allison James, of the James Beauty and Brains Employment Agency, tried to appease him. It wasn't working. “Look Allison, I know you've sent over four girls already, and I appreciate it; I really do. Still, all of them had that look in their eyes, like, they wanted to fuckin' eat me for dinner.”

Alec scratched his head in frustration pausing long enough to hear the same detailed explanation she'd given him fifteen minutes ago. He understood it the first time, he just didn't want to hear it or accept it, because he was desperate. He was leaving the day after tomorrow, and he needed an assistant that didn't mind working for the holiday away from home.

His cell phone shrilled, and he moaned pulling the phone from his inner blazer pocket with a soft curse. *I can't handle another problem today.* “Ally, hold a minute it's Mom, on the other line. Yeah, I'll tell her you said “Merry Christmas”. Don't hang up on me! *We* are not finished yet.”

Alec took a deep breath already knowing what this conversation was about, what it was always about. “Hello, Mom. Ally said, “Merry Christmas”,” he said and repeated, “You went to church this morning, lit a candle for me, and made a Christmas Wish?”

He rolled his eyes skyward. “Do I need to ask what you wished for? Of course I don't, what else do you wish for every Christmas, since I got my first chest hairs?” Alec chuckled.

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"I'm not being a smart ass, Mother. Nevertheless, you make it seem like you're not happy by anything else I've accomplished, in my life and please, stop talking as if you're going to die tomorrow."

Alec shook his head. He had a Christmas wish too, he needed someone to save him from this bad day...no, this bad month. This has always been the worse time of the year and for once, he would love for it to be different than every other year.

"Well, you never know Mom, you may get what you hoped for this year. No mother not the marriage, but I can always bring home a babe or two," he teased.

Alec laughed; his Mother didn't, which meant she's serious about what she wanted for this Christmas. She was ready for him to settle down, and she wanted to be a grandmother. It would take a bit to get the second, but on Christmas Eve when he proposes to Erica, she would get the first part of her wish.

Alec caught the tail end of what she was saying and replied, "Yes, I'll be leaving the day after tomorrow, and hopefully I'll have an assistant in tow. Either way, everything will be ready and cleaned up before everyone else arrives."

God, don't start on Erica again. She did.

"No, Erica, is coming later with her parents." He cleared his throat. "No, Mother, Erica doesn't mind helping me prepare the cabin, she's just swamped with charity events," he lied.

Erica has never lifted a dust rag in her life, and she refused to do it, even for me. He thought, but didn't dare say it to his mother.

Alec rolled his eyes skyward. "Mom, be nice. I know how you feel about Erica and her parents; but please try to be civil, for me. Are you sure you and Dad don't want to ride up there with me?"

He closed his eyes and pressed in on the bridge of his nose.

"Okay, the weekend it is, tell Pop to drive safely." Alec knew if he didn't interrupt her, she would go on forever. "Mom, I love ya, but Ally is on the other line, and I'm desperate for an assistant. I'm drowning here. Yeah, I lost another Executive Assistant. Not now, mother. I'll call you before I leave. Love you too...no I don't know Ms. Lane's daughter...yes, I heard you the first time...bye."

He cursed softly. Great! He finally chose to marry the one woman with a similar temperament to him and his attentive mother couldn't stand her. Could anything else go wrong today? He cursed as he remembered Allison was on hold.

"Ally, look babe, you know me. I can't deny a pretty woman a roll in the hay, but she

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has to know that I'm not looking to marry her because of it. Yeah, I'm giving up my old ways, I'm finally going to settle down, and I believe Erica would be a good understanding wife. Why you call Erica a bitch? She comes from a good family. Her father is a man as driven as I am, and she can handle my workaholic mentality. However, I can't risk any bad publicity at this time."

Alec rubbed his temple with his fingers.

"I can appreciate your emphatic stance, but I didn't get in this mess alone, Ally. You owe me big. I need someone, reliable and dedicated to her work; no more loose women looking for deep pockets. I needed an assistant like yesterday."

Alec paused and listened to Allison, his mouth dropped wide. "Did you just say you had an ex-Playboy centerfold, with a what cup size? Do those really exist? Now that's she graduated, she's looking for a flexible job as an assistant? How flexible is she?"

He cocked an eyebrow at Allison's answer. "*Damn*, you weren't talking about *flexible hours*, I see."

Alec closed his eyes with a deep sigh. He had to stick to his plans, he wasn't a kid fresh out of school, and he has had his share of beautiful women. Still, Ally was hitting him below the belt, and she knew it.

"How did I miss that you had a cruel streak after all these years?" He laughed at Allison's reply and caught himself. He had to remain serious and focused or he would never hear the end of it from his *about to be* fiancée Erica Fontaine. Okay maybe he should be calling Erica his fiancé, because in a few weeks, on Christmas Eve, they will be announcing it to their families.

If it weren't for his ailing mother and her persistent need for grandchildren, he would have remained one of *Society Magazine's* confirmed bachelors. Yet, since his brother's death, his mother poured the guilty readily.

Already his normal humdrum life was changing to suit another person's insecurities. Should he even be considering marrying a woman that didn't trust him?

In the end, isn't that why hiring a simple Jane assistant, was so important to Erica? She didn't trust him to keep his hands to himself, around a beautiful woman. Why are the gorgeous women the ones with the biggest insecurities?

"Look Ally, we've been best friends since pre-school, and you get all my business. So I need you to get on this...wait a minute someone is at my office door. I'll check back in tomorrow."

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Alec placed the phone back on its cradle and shouted for the knocker to come in.

"Mr. Mercer, Mr. Owens told me to stop by and drop off these files before I left for the evening."

Alec whirled around in his high-back leather chair tearing his eyes away from the Seattle skyline. At least it wasn't raining. He thought absently. "Thank you..." He halted, his brow lifted in quiet surprise. This woman worked somewhere in his building. She had to be from a temporary agency because she definitely wasn't one of Ally's girls.

In a short time, he summed her up; that was all the time, he needed to access the short heavysset black woman that entered his office with files in hands.

She was curvaceous, even though, he would deem, she was well into the plus sizes, she wore it well and the calf length skirt with a matching linen jacket fit her roundness nicely. Her dark brown hair was pulled back tightly at the nape of her neck and not a hair out of place.

As he reached for the file she handed him, her pink tinted perfectly heart shaped lips curved into a smile revealing short spaced teeth. Her glasses slipped down her short round tipped nose, and he glimpsed very beautiful friendly eyes before she pushed them back up her nose.

"You're welcome Mr. Mercer." She smiled again. "Mr. Owens said if you had any questions you can call him at home. Have a *Merry Christmas!*"

She turned to leave and Alec found himself stopping her, his mind thinking crazy thoughts; except, hey, he was feeling desperate. "Wait! You're Mary, right?"

She turned her attention back to him and those lovely eyes locked with his. He saw through the glasses and saw that they were a warm brown; sort of like a puppy, he once had and loved very dearly as a child. He didn't know her, but he liked her.

"Mary Christmas," she said.

Alec thought he had missed something while immersed in the warm fuzzy thoughts of his childhood pet.

"Pardon me." His head leaned to the side in question.

Her heavy jowls spread into a wider grin and he saw a dimple deepen on both sides of her mouth as she stuck out her hand and said. "My name is, Mary Christmas."

Alec's green eyes widened at the young woman who stood before him, breaking the monotony of another humdrum day by her presence. "You're kidding me."

"No Sir." Mary laughed. "I think the joke was on me, when I was born to parents who

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will do anything for a laugh. Trust me, I wasn't mentally scarred by it."

Alec couldn't help but grin at her humor and the sound of her voice and the endearing drawl. "You're from the south?"

"Oops." She prettily put a hand over her mouth as she giggled. Rolling her eyes behind her glasses, she added, "I'm sorry, when I'm nervous it gets worse."

"I make you nervous?" He cocked an eyebrow.

"Well, yeah. I don't get up here much but with it being close to Christmas it seems to be getting shorthanded around here." Mary rattled and giggled again shaking her head. "I'm sorry, I'm sure you are a busy man and don't want to hear all of this."

"No please, sit down and let's talk." Alec waved at one of the empty suede chairs in front of his desk. "So you're from the south. What part?"

"Alabama." She answered as she took a seat smoothing her skirt neatly over her knees and folding her hands demurely in her wide lap.

"My parents are from Florida." Alec supplied, not sure why he felt incline to reveal any aspect of his personal life to her.

"Oh, I like Florida. It's a great place to vacation, but I don't do humidity and heat really well. It's one of the reasons why I moved from Alabama." Mary trailed off with a chuckle her pretty face blushing. "You didn't ask about all of this, did you?"

Alec smiled again leaning forward in his chair. "You've been working for Owens, for what, almost two years?"

Her eyes widened as if she was surprise, he'd noticed. "I've been Mr. Owens' assistant for a little over two years now."

"Strange, we don't seem to cross paths too often. I believe I see you mostly in the outer offices interacting with the employees on this floor."

"I hope that hasn't been a problem, I keep an index of birthdays, anniversaries, and such, and I intend to spend more time up here than I should because of it--"

"No, of course not," Alec chimed in with an easy grin. "I just wonder why you never personally gave me my gifts. I believe my assistants have delivered your gifts to me in the past, and it's never afforded me the opportunity to personally say "thank you". I don't know if you were ever told this, but I run an open door policy with all my employees. At the end of the day I'm just like the rest of you."

"Uh," she tilted her head to the side. "No, I wouldn't say that, Mr. Mercer, if it wasn't for you..." She paused leaning forward in her seat. "*We* depend on you for our livelihood.

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I'm thankful that I have a great job and that I can work for a company that allows me to celebrated holidays with my family. Giving your employees two weeks off during the busiest time of the year in your field is very generous."

"Ms. Christmas, I need you to be honest with me. Do my employees find me...unapproachable?"

Alec tried not to chuckle and failed miserably when he saw Mary fidgeting in her seat as if she was trying to decide if she should say what she was thinking or tell him what she assumed he wanted to hear. Apparently frankness won.

"Er, well, most of the time you're breezing through the offices with an entourage of executives on your heels and a cell phone to your ear. I think it's not that you aren't approachable, it's just that everyone sees how busy you are and I for one would never impose on your already full schedule," she explained. "It's just feasible for me and the other employees to deal with your assistant."

"Speaking of assistance," he stated, seeing a perfect opening. "I find that I'm without one, or I would have sent someone down to retrieve these documents in the first place. I apologize for any added work I'm putting on you."

"Don't apologize, I--"

"No," he broke in. "I asked *Owens* to make the delivery, and he should have done so himself. I know you should have left over an hour ago. We allowed all our hourly employees to go home early with pay to begin the holiday vacation, it's part of our gift to you, along with the bonus." Alec released a long sigh. "My executives get paid well to be at my beck and call. You should have been allowed to leave on time with the others, while your boss, saw to it that *his boss* received what he asked for." Alec spoke bluntly.

"Really, I don't mind," Mary blurted. "I shouldn't be here taking up your time."

"No, it's I that is taking up you time, and if you will indulge me, I do so because I have a reason for keeping you here." Alec leaned back in his chair clasping his fingers over his abdomen. "I have a dilemma, Ms. Christmas." He smiled. "May I call you Mary?"

"Of course." She smiled again.

Alec was caught off his guard as he was hit with a flip-flop feeling in the pit of his stomach. He could swear every time she smiled at him the prettier, she seemed to get. Alec shook his head in silent protest. He wasn't looking for looks, he was looking for a new personal assistant that was smart and didn't threaten his girlfriend in anyway.

"Mary, how would you like a new position?"

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“Huh?” Her double chin dropped and her round eyebrows arched high like McDonald's golden arches. “A new position, Sir?”

“Please, call me Alec,” he insisted.

“I don't think that would be proper.”

“Nonsense, I'm your boss, you're about to become my personal assistant, and I don't like those I work close with to call me Mr. Mercer. Mr. Mercer is my dad.” He shrugged his broad shoulders. “Well, Dr. Mercer is my dad, but you know what I mean. He's retired now.”

Alec scratched his head feeling foolish. When had he become chatty? Hell, he usually didn't have enough time to get six hours sleep, and here he sat, one hour late for his dinner appointment with Erica sharing his personal frustrations.

“How about it Mary? Are you interested in advancing? Would you like to become my personal assistant?”

“I'm honored Mister...um, Alec, but I really don't like the thought of leaving Mr. Owens in a lurch. He was nice to give me a permanent job as his assistant, when I tried for over a year to get my foot inside this door because regardless of my impressive resume, I never got a return call.”

Alec flushed. He knew for the past few years he had gave Allison's Executives Assistants all his business and never thought anymore about it, because the women that she sent over did the service expected of them. The problem came when they also expected to land themselves a high paying executive. Sometimes, the plan worked, other times they found themselves out of a job because they brought their personal displeasure into the work place. Which brings him to his current situation.

“You mind my asking how you come to work for Mr. Owens?”

“By association,” Mary mused. “I worked in the floral shop with his wife, and we became very good friends. She knew I had a degree in Corporate Management, and had been an Executive Assistant in Alabama, before I moved here. She put in a good word for me.”

“I'm sure she did,” he laughed remembering what Owens last assistant looked like. His wife wasn't a fool. Alec rested his chin on his hands; his elbows perched on his desk. He really did like listening to her talk. Her voice was soothing like waking up in the mountain cabin with fresh snow on the ground feeling cozy beneath, just the right amount of blankets on the bed. He sighed.

“Yup, she sure did, and I owe her and Mr. Owens, big time.” She finished.

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“Well, Mary, I too know a good thing when I see it, and I’ve got to have you.” Alec said and caught himself. Dropping his hands to his desk he clasped his hands together. He really needed to get more rest. What was he saying? “I mean, I want you as my assistant. I will handle Owens.”

“I suppose as long as he won’t object--”

Alec’s brow pulled into an affronted frown. She trailed off into silence. Of course, Owens wouldn’t object.

He loosened his silk tie, something else he usually didn’t do outside his home. Yet, it seemed rather warm in here tonight. “Mary, I assure you Owens will be agreeable. Now, I need you to start immediately, because my family and I will be heading up to Greenwater Ranch in the Cascades for the holiday break. You’ll need to be ready the day after tomorrow. I’ll be by to pick you up, say 8 a.m., and make sure you dress comfortable because it’s about a two hour drive.”

“Huh? Me, go with you?” Mary leaned forward in the chair.

She only said what Alec was thinking. Why did he just invite his new assistant to spend the holidays with him and his family? Well, he had done it before, of course, but those women were his current paramours. His intention with Mary was to leave her here working and communicate electronically.

Nevertheless, what if the lines froze, yeah, that happened sometimes up there. They could be without power for days and then where would he be with his assistant, new and not being able to ask him questions. Yes, this was for the best. Mary had to come with him.

“Yes, of course. Is there a problem?”

“Well, there could be. Will I be back home by Christmas eve?”

“No, you will be spending Christmas with me and my family,” Alec answered. “Why are you shaking your head?”

“I’m sorry Mr. Mercer. I can’t accept your offer.” Mary said bluntly standing up and smoothed her hands over well rounded hips. Nice full hips, he thought, but that wasn’t here or there.

“Why not?”

“If I can’t visit my parents for Christmas, you’re going to have to find someone else.” Mary said pushing her glasses back up on her nose.

Alec released a deep sigh his lips pursed in thought. “Mary, I’ll be paying you handsomely for the holiday.”

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“That's not the point Mr. Mercer. I'm grateful for the offer, but in my thirty-two years, I've never missed spending Christmas with my Ma and Pa, and they're getting up in the years, so I don't intend to start now.”

Mary turned making her way towards the door and for a moment, Alec felt a weird sense of panic. He would wonder about it later, but for now, he couldn't let her walk out of his office and possibly out of his life. He stood up bracing the heels of his hand on his desk.

“Mary, don't go!”

She halted with a hand on the doorknob and faced him once more, waiting for him to say something.

Alec was as surprised as she was from of what came out of his mouth next and hours from now he would never understand why he said it. “Ask your parents to come along too. The more the merrier. As you said, it's Christmas, and it'll be fun. There are plenty of available rooms, it used to be an old ski lodge that was remodeled into a vacation home and there will be plenty of food.”

“I don't know,” Mary moaned, worrying her bottom lip. “Are you sure it won't be a problem, because it sounds like it will be a lot of fun, especially if there is snow.”

“As you begin to work with me Mary, you will find that I don't make offers that I don't mean.” Alec answered. If he hadn't been sure when he made the offer, he was now, looking at the current smile on her face. He forged ahead trying to make the deal even sound sweeter. “You know this will give us a chance to see if we work well together. If you aren't happy with me, then once we return you still will have your position with Owens and with him being away for the holidays, none the wiser.”

“I suppose you're right.” Mary agreed softly.

“As I stated, the place is huge and my parents will welcome the distraction of company. Since my brother died, Christmases doesn't seem to be the same,” Alec confessed.

Even though this was the first time he admitted it aloud, it was the truth. He was sure his parents would welcome the distraction and be delighted with the extra company, especially fellow southerners, that was the type of folks they were. However, it was Bostonian born Erica and her blue-blooded parents that made them feel less than comfortable being themselves.

Speaking of Erica, she wasn't going to appreciate him turning their engagement family gathering into a working holiday with a family neither of them knew. Did Erica's parents have a problem with black people? It was a conversation he never felt obligated to have with

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her? Hell, he didn't even know if his potential fiancée have a problem with people of other cultures.

As if sensing his train of thought Mary stared at him. "You know, if you wish to rescind the offer at any time before we leave, I won't be offended." Mary stated, her entire face softening giving her a somewhat ethereal quiet appearance that had him staring at her in a more accessing way.

"Mary, do you always wear your glasses?" He found himself asking.

She grinned in that way that was contagious, and he smiled back. "Only if I want to see."

Alec threw back his head and laughed. "Of course."

"Seriously, I wear contacts, when I'm in a more social setting." She added with a saucy wink, and he assumed he was mistaken because of its subtleness. "I prefer my eye glasses for reading and working."

With a grin still on his lips he said, "I won't change my mind, just make sure everyone is ready to go early."

"No problem," she nodded. "I've taken up enough of your time. Good night Mr. Mercer."

"Alec." He interrupted.

"I'll call you that once we know for sure if I'm going to be your assistant." Mary said logically. "So, as I said, if you find yourself changing your mind before we leave, just let me know."

"I won't," he assured her.

Alec watched her as she scribbled off her phone number and address on a piece of note pad paper on his desk. "I'll see you the day after tomorrow, and if you *change your mind*," she repeated for the third time. "I wish you and your family a safe trip and Merry Christmas."

"Mary." Alec sighed, leaning back in his chair, his hands clasped across his abdomen.

"Yes Sir?"

"Pack warmly and you may want to bring a couple of semi-formals. We dress up for Christmas dinner and New Year's Eve, we throw a big party for the townspeople."

"Mr. Mercer..." Mary began.

He already knew what she was going to say. "I won't change my mind, Mary. Have a good night." He dismissed her.

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CHAPTER TWO

Mary slowly walked down the hall and practically floated into the elevator pressing the button that would take her from the thirty-third floor down to her workstation located on twelfth floor.

Alec Mercer was even more handsome than his magazine photos. She had seen him from afar on occasions, but this had been the first time she actually was close enough to really get a good look at him.

Tall, dark, and handsome he is, but that wasn't a surprise, she could see how gorgeous he was even from a distance. The one thing she hadn't expected from a man in his position, was his kindness and the ease in which he laughed and smiled.

He had a smile that made her stomach tingle and her breathing labor intensive. She liked him, and she was going to enjoy working with him more. Mary stepped off the elevator into the private parking garage of Mercer Advertising Incorporated. Security was there as usual.

"Merry Christmas, Ms. Mary Christmas," he called out with a wave of familiarity.

Mary stopped as usual, placing her briefcase on the ground beside her, she leaned over the security station desk and reached for a mint out of the candy jar she kept filled up for the guys. "Hello George, you got the night shift this week?"

"Nah, I volunteered to do the holiday stretch, since the building is practically empty for the next two weeks, I figured it would be an easy go of it. Not to mention Mr. Mercer gives us a nice size bonus," he confided.

"Wow, I didn't know he did that, and I'm sure the money will come in handy with the new baby and all." Mary smiled, wondering what else she didn't know about Alec Mercer.

Before meeting him in person, he barely had time to speak with anyone, passing by barely glancing to the right or left as people stepped out of his way. His voice carried a tone of influential authority and allowed for no debates as he waltzed through issuing orders while holding a mobile phone to his ear.

"Definitely," he nodded. "Having another mouth to feed, not to mention my brother was

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laid off his job this close to Christmas. I would like to help him and his family also.”

“I’m surprised with you being the new guy in security you didn’t get bumped for the holiday shift.” Mary picked up her briefcase preparing to leave. She had some packing to do, not to mention calling her parents and telling them they were going to be going out of town for the holiday, if they wanted to go with her.

She hoped so, she didn’t want to face the Mercer family and friends without reinforcements. What if they didn’t like her for one reason or another? Did she want to spend her holiday with no one to talk to?

Did rich folks like the Mercer’s sing Christmas carols and drink eggnog? Oh God, she needed to go to find some extra gifts. Mary wondered how many people were going to be there? She supposed, she could bring along some extra non-tagged items that can be given to a male or female, and some extra hand towels with her stitching basket; she could always give monogrammed hand-towels in a clench.

Mary shook her head to clear her thoughts of Alec Mercer and his demand that she deviate from her usual holiday plans. No sooner had she decided to not think about Alec, his name was being brought up once again.

“Mr. Mercer, found out about the new baby, and he asked me would I like to do it and I said yes, of course. Even the highest sonority is not going to argue with him, but he gave those who would have had first dibs a bonus to, or so I heard.” George smiled broadened. “He’s some kind of guy, huh. Who knew?”

“Yes, so it seems.” Mary smiled thoughtfully. “Have a safe Christmas and I will see you in a couple of weeks.”

“Take care, Mary and thanks again for the monogrammed gloves, now when I lose one, someone always bring it back to me.”

She turned briefly. “No problem, handsome. Take care of that family of yours and tell your wife, Trish, hello.”

“Will do,” he nodded picking up the ringing phone.

On the drive home, Mary tried once more to put Alec from her mind as she took the expressway home. In spite of her good intentions, she found herself reliving each moment of their conversation in his office, wondering why she agreed to join him during the holidays with his family and friends in a cabin hideaway.

She thought about the way his eyes twinkled as he smiled, feeling disturbed by her train of thought, she shivered again. “Don’t even start thinking about him, that way, Mary,” she

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told herself as she pulled her car into her townhouse driveway. “I have to keep this in proper perspective because there is just too many things wrong with me thinking about my boss this way.”

Mary let herself into the house and dropped her keys on the oblong table beside the door in the entrance. Without hesitation, she unconsciously followed her usual routine of kicking off her pumps. Mary strongly hated wearing shoes more than anything. She was all for the custom of no shoes in the house and she required it of everyone that visited her. It immediately gave people a sense of comfort, as if they were in their own homes. How serious can a person get when they're standing vulnerable in their shoeless feet

Next, went the briefcase on the upholstered bench against the structured wall next to the stairs, and her coat over the briefcase. She refused to look at the contents ever again until she went into her home office or the workplace the next day. Every other part of her home was her safe haven from the stress of the day and work did not enter this part of her home, *ever*, until today.

The front doorbell shrieked causing her to jump. She rarely got visitors and when she did they knew to call first. Mary groaned, turned around and padded in stocking feet back to her ringing front door. “Get off the bell why don't cha,” she muttered peeping through the door peephole. A gasped of surprise touched her lips, and she gulped deeply. “Oh damn,” she whispered.

The bell shrilled again throughout her house and she smoothed her suddenly damp palms over her skirt before opening the door. “Mr. Mercer.”

“Alec.” He entered and his powerful presence seemed to take all the air out of the room.

“*Mr. Mercer*, don't take another step!” Mary called out.

“I'm sorry, I know I should have called first, but I was on my way home, and I forgot that I needed to give you copies of the outdated portfolios that are *rush* important. I hope you don't mind; of course you don't. These needs to roll out by New Year's Day and--”

“I do mind.”

“Huh?”

“I said I do mind, you charging up in here without being invited,” Mary stated plainly.

“I see.”

From the look on his face, she could tell he didn't see is intrusion as being rude at all. Mary took a deep sigh and said, “Since you're here, you may come inside, but first, I need you to remove your shoes and give them to me.”

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He looked down at his feet and back up at her.

"Pardon me?" he asked, his black eyebrows arching in question. "Did you ask me for my shoes?"

"If you're staying, hand over the shoes otherwise you can give me the documents and leave. I will look at the files, after I pour me a glass of wine and order Chinese food for dinner. Not a minute before. When I come to work in the morning I will have the documents with me."

"You're serious?"

"Mr. Mercer, my home is my sanctuary and my sanctuary has been blessed and purified of all stress and negativity," she explained, yet he appeared to still be clueless regardless of her explanation.

"Excuse me, is this the way you treated Mr. Owens when he was your boss?" Alec asked abruptly.

Mary placed her hands on her hips and stated, "Mr. Owens wouldn't dare intrude on my home time, no more than I his. Also, I'm the boss in this house, and I'm still waiting on the shoes."

"So for your time I have to give you my fifteen hundred dollar, *A. Testoni*," he quibbled.

She could swear his strait nose went up in the air a notch. She shook her head and closed the front door and turned her attention back to her unexpected guest.

Crossing her arms over her ample breast she dismissed his argument and added with equal bluntness, "I paid three hundred and seventy dollars per square feet of hard earned money for this two-bedroom two-bath townhouse just because a professional *Feng shui* consultant told me this was a harmonious living space. Right now, you're slowly eating up my harmony, Mr. Mercer. So, lose the shoes and the paperwork, or I'll see you in the morning."

He suddenly didn't look like his cocky self-assured self as he reached down and removed his shoes. "You aren't keeping the shoes, you just don't want me wearing shoes in your house, right?"

"Now, what would I do with a pair of men's shoes?" Mary smiled looking at his socked feet. "Fifteen hundred dollar shoes and you have a hole in your socks?" She quirked a brow taking the proffered shoes from his hands and placing them beside her pumps, feeling a brief disturbance from seeing his size thirteen's next to her size eight and a half. There was something intimate about this picture.

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“First, maybe you have a boyfriend that is my shoe size,” he grinned sheepishly. When she turned around again he was removing his overcoat. “Secondly, I had a big meeting earlier today for a multi-million dollar account and these are my lucky socks.”

“I don’t have a boyfriend so your shoes are safe, Mr. Mercer.” Mary cocked her head to the side adding, “You know, I wouldn’t have pictured you as the superstitious type that would need luck of any kind.”

He cocked his head to the side looking at her from her head to her stocking feet that wiggled from his accessing stare. “That’s makes us even because I never pictured you being the *Feng shui* type.”

“I have so few devices, so allow me the couple I do have.” She giggled and hung up his coat and her own that she placed over her briefcase earlier in the entryway closet, once more feeling a fluttering in the pit of her stomach seeing their coats side by side.

“May I take off my jacket and tie too? For some reason I now feel ridiculously over dressed standing here in my socks.” He pursed his lips in deep thought. “I have no idea why.”

“Please, you can lay them over on the chaise by the bay windows.” Mary smiled walking over to the lacquer flat box she kept on the dark Elmwood *Qing* Coffee Table and removed one of the many restaurant menus.

“You order in a lot, I see.” He commented from over her shoulder, she gasped and turned too quickly finding herself nose to chest with him holding her by the shoulders to keep her from toppling back against the table. “Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you.”

Mary licked her lips and saw his eyes follow the movement. He dropped his hands from her shoulders licking his own lips.

“Uh, if you don't mind, it's been a long day, and I would like to get comfortable.” She stepped aside. “How about you look at the menu, and order something. I'd like a number seventeen and number five, with hot and sour soup.”

He reached out and took the menu from her hand. Their fingers touched briefly and their eyes locked. Alec cleared his throat and walked around the sofa table to sit on the informal cozy overstuffed gray sofa. “I like the way you have that dividing screen over near the window. The soft lighting of the setting sun coming through the windows shadows the silhouetted prints embedded in the screen. It seems to bring life to the corner behind it.”

“Wow, no one has ever noticed that before, and I put a lot of thought into it.” Mary pointed out. “I wanted to direct the energy from the window over to that corner because it's

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too dark and basically useless to place a plant over there. How did you know?"

A slow lazy grin widened his mouth. "I had a girlfriend that decorated on a few of my investment suites abroad."

"I see." Mary spoke softly, chewing on the corner of her mouth. "Huh, I'm going on upstairs to change, do you suppose you can handle placing the order? Just tell them my name, they know me, and they can put it on my account."

"You have an account with a *Chinese* takeout place."

"Well it's not like having an account at *Crush*; but, Mr. Wu has my charge card number in his files."

Alec's eyes narrowed on her face. "Have you've eaten at *Crush*?"

"Are you kidding, on what I'm paid?" Mary caught herself and blushed. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

"Of course you did. Nevertheless, you no longer have to worry about it. I assure you working for me, your salary will be more than satisfactory, and you will have an open account at *Crush*, so, if there are any clients I need you to meet in a more social setting..."

"Will that be happening often?"

"Possibly. I'm a busy man and my appointments sometimes overlap. There will be times I'll need you to be in one of those places until I arrive. So not only will you have an open first class all the way accounting at *Crush*, but several other places. I will get the index to you, of course."

"Are we discussing business," Mary asked. "Do you ever just relax and not think about anything in particular?"

"Is that a possibility?" He smiled softly. "I don't know how to relax anymore. Insane, I know, but I've been going none-stop in one form or the other, since I graduated from Dartmouth College." As if on cue, his cell-phone in his jacket pocket penetrating the soothing quietness of the room loudly. "Excuse me, while I get that."

Mary moistened her lips and allowed her eyes to feast. The tailored navy pants and baby blue silk button-down shirt revealed a body that made her mind race and her heart beat faster. In addition, his buttocks were tightly muscled and their appealing shape cried out for her hands to mold them.

He went to Dartmouth, an *Ivy Leaguer*, why was she not surprised. Alec's probably walked around with a silver spoon shoved up that perfect ass, since birth. She wondered what he'd do if she reached out and she playfully goosed his bottom.

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In her family, a butt didn't stand a chance. Around every corner a good-humored pat waited. Along with teasing pinches of affection, between her parents, mixed with a raunchy grip with bellies touching and lips kissing. She envied their ability to love so openly. It was something she has spent her adult life searching for and yet to find. Deep respect and love were something you assume would be easy to find in a world full of so many men.

A few times, she genuinely believed she had found the elusive love of her life. It was amazing how easily words of love came from a man's lips when he believes he's going to get sex afterwards. Yet, when she told them she was waiting for marriage before she went all the way, they would stop calling.

Mary was in no way completely ignorant, there was plenty a body could do without penis penetration, but that was never enough to keep any of them loyal. She couldn't count how many times they charged her of using her virginity as a bartering tool to trap a man! *Now, how crazy was that?*

What happened to a woman wanting to wait, just because it was her right to do so? Didn't it used to be something that was valued and appreciated? At the very least, respected? Well, she would live alone, before she compromised on her dreams of having the love and security her parents have.

"Okay, where were we?" Alec turned his attention back to her and his cell phone rang again. He cursed softly. "Hello, uh...hold on a moment." He looked at Mary. "Do you have somewhere I can take this call? It's private"

Mary rolled her eyes releasing a deep sigh. It was going to be a long night. "You can take the call right here."

"Were will you be?"

"I'm going to be upstairs getting out of these work clothes." She looked into his eyes and pointed to the menu. "Make better use of that phone of yours and call for some food. You won't like me when my sugar gets low from hunger," she teased, amazed at how easy it was to do so with him. "I would also appreciate you turning off that cell phone until after dinner."

"Mary, are you giving me orders?"

Mary hesitated from the seriousness of his tone before lifting her chin a notch and placing her hands on her hips. This was her home. "Why, yes I am. Do you have a problem with that?"

Alec's eyebrows arched in surprise and his wide mouth spread into a grin. "If I did, I

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sure don't now, Mary," he said her name as if he knew her intimately.

Mary steadied herself when she turned on trembling legs to saunter up the steps. When she turned and caught his green eyes gazing at her ass, she felt heat steal across her face.

Caught. He turned his attention back to his phone call.

She smiled as she continued up the stairs.

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CHAPTER THREE

Dinner long behind them and the table cleared Mary and Alec sat huddled together going over a final campaign layout package for a large beverage franchise.

“Mary, you're a Godsend. If this had been sent out with that error it could have cost me at least 100,000 dollars in revenues,” Alec broke the quiet, brushing a hand over his face in a sigh.

Mary shook her head in disbelief. “I can't believe your last assistant made such a foolish mistake on their invoice. I'm just glad it wasn't sent to them, because they could have forced you to honor this amount instead.”

“I don't know what to tell you. Admittedly, Ally's girls look like something out of Victoria's Secret magazines, but I assure you their academic qualifications were impeccable. Allison wouldn't have it any other way, she advertises the women at her agency as beauty with brains.”

“I'm sure they do have brains, but when you're pretty, you don't have to use it, because being beautiful and helpless seems to instantly bring men to your rescue,” Mary said, honestly. She ran the tip of her ink pin over the columns of figures one last time. She swiveled her chair from side to side with nervous energy. “Yep, must be nice to be so beautiful, that you get to do things that only the average woman read about in romance novels.”

She looked up from the report to see Alec had crossed his arms over his chest, and leaned back casually in the high-back leather chair staring at her. She became increasingly uneasy under his scrutiny, “I'm sorry, I have a tendency to jangle-on when I'm tired.”

Alec said “Which one of those categories do you put yourself in Mary?”

“You tell me Mr. Mercer. Would Allison James Agency hire me to become an invaluable assistant to a man like yourself?”

As Alec contemplated her question his mind went through the several assistants he tumbled over the years. Geri, with the sultry eyes, Tina, with the knockem' dead natural D's,

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Lana, with the legs that didn't stop, or Pamela, with an ass you could rest all of your hopes and dreams on, sort of like Mary's backside.

Geesh, where did that thought come from? None of Ally's girls would ever physically look like Ms. Mary Christmas. After the conversation he just had with Allison after Mary went up stairs it helped him to realize none of those women would ever be allowed to be curvaceous and thick like Mary, without losing their jobs.

Maybe it was time for him to find another employment agency; he always assumed that Allison hired all kinds of executive assistants. He assumed being a close friend, she sent a particular type to his offices because in the male dominant advertising field, a beautiful assistant could seal a deal with a subtle smile.

It wasn't until he was in need of a less than model perfect assistant that he realized the truth, and it seemed as if he needed to make more changes in the office. He was fortunate no one had filed a discrimination lawsuit against his advertising firm. Alec made a mental note to meet with the head of personnel and Allison. A new year was coming and he was making changes in his personal life by proposing to Erica, so why not clean up his corporate office, or at least add more versatility based on merits, and not appearances.

As if Mary sensed she had put him on the spot, she politely began to discuss the advertisement plan setting on the desk before them. Nevertheless, Alec decided he didn't want it to be easy with Mary; he wanted to keep things comfortable and honest between them. It was nice to have a woman he could talk to without threading lightly because he wanted to fuck her. He didn't have to worry about that with Mary, she wasn't his type.

"You know Mary, you're right, you don't fit the standard model mold that Allison basically requires at her firm, or the type of woman, I usually choose as my assistant." He paused not sure how to continue, but with honesty. "In advertising I deal with beautiful people or beautiful things all the time and in doing so, I've become jaded in the way I was seeing everything, including the people I surrounded myself with."

"And now?"

"Now, I suppose you've opened my eyes to some needed eventual changes at Mercer's Advertising. I need you to set up a conference after the trip, of course with my personnel department."

"I think that would be a wise move. As it is now, you could be looking at a future lawsuit. It only takes one visiting associate, or disgruntled employee to file a complaint. You may consider adding some more diversity to the office, and it wouldn't hurt to hire a few

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male Executive Assistants.” She smiled to lessen the effect of her bluntness. “At least if a lawsuit were to come in before you make the changes you can place the blame on the fact that you contracted an agency to handle hiring for you and they had poor judgment.”

Alec shook his dark head. “I wouldn't do that to Allison. I'm the one with the last word especially when it came to my personal assistants,” he replied truthfully.

“Which brings us to little ol' me.” Mary paused for a moment before asking. “May I ask why you ask me to work for you instead of having Ms. James send over another assistant?”

“Actually, I was on the phone speaking to Allison. I wanted something different from my norm. I was growing tired of women that couldn't separate business from...non-business. I wanted someone that could remain professional and ...well you know,” he shrugged sheepishly.

“Yeah, you mean someone you wouldn't be sexually attracted to,” Mary, smiled sadly and released a long sigh. “Suddenly, in walked me, *Mary, Mary, Ordinary.*”

“I know how shallow I must appear,” his voice softened with sincerity. “I wish I could say that I hadn't stepped over the line with a few of my personal assistants in the past--”

Mary snorted and rolled her eyes.

Alec cut her a profound glare. “*I also know*, my personal life is rarely a secret, so there is no need to lie to you now, just to paint myself in a better light. I'm sure my reputation in the office for mixing business with pleasure, is well known.”

“Yeah, I'm afraid, I already find you completely hopeless.” Mary's mouth spread into a teasing grin as she nodded in agreement. “Still, be warned, Mr. Mercer, the first time you ask me to cover your butt, about some indiscretion and lie to your fiancée or wife, I'm out of there. I won't lie.”

“For shame,” he gasped placing his hand over his heart in feigned insult. “Oh, you aren't going to make these new changes easy for me, are you? As of this moment I don't have either, but I hope to change that soon. I can also assure you Mary; once I make a commitment, I'm very loyal. I would never cheat on the woman I love.”

“I see.” She made a motion of zipping her lips and throwing away the key before saying, “As long as you're not looking for an assistant that bats her lashes at you and tell you how wonderful you are, then, I suppose, we shall get along splendidly.”

“Oh, that's a shame, because I can tell behind the glasses you have beautiful eyes,” he teased with a smile that stole her breath away. “So are you sure you won't flutter, those long lashes at me, just a little, every now and then?”

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Mary blushed and looked away from his intent stare. "It works in both ways; mind you, your lashes put some women to shame," she said honestly and added, "Also, you don't need to flatter me, I know my abilities and my shortcomings."

He shook his head, "Mary, when a lovely woman receives a compliment, she accepts it with grace, even if she doesn't believe it's sincere. You never let a gentleman know, you don't believe him." Alec laughed. "Besides, I deem, I already told you I never say things I don't mean."

Mary adored the sound of his laughter; it made her smile and feel warmth in all the right places. "So you keep telling me. I believe you're saying you've *never* told a woman you loved her to get her into your bed." She crossed her arms across her ample breast.

"*Never!*" Alec's smile widened as she gave him a skeptical look that told him she clearly didn't believe him. "Well, maybe once, when I was seventeen."

She shook her head.

"I'm not scoring any points with you, am I? So, how about I tell you something I know you'll believe I'm sincere about." He leaned towards Mary, his face so close she could feel his warm breath against her cheek. "I have thoroughly enjoyed this evening. I don't remember when I've had such a comfortable evening, working. The hours we've spent going over these sketches and contracts, seeing them through your enthusiastic eyes, made me feel like the young advertising agent that nailed his first multi-million dollar contract."

"Really?" Mary's dark eyes widen in surprise. "Why, thank you."

"No, thank you, Mary." He touched and squeezed the top of her hand. "Also, never again do I want to hear you call yourself "ordinary". You're extraordinary to me. A true breath of fresh air."

"Okay, you're pushing the envelope of believability now, so stop while you're ahead," she giggled.

"One more thing, and I will stop embarrassing you. How did you instantly understand what I was trying to ultimately achieve in my advertising proposals without me having to explain my motivation?"

"I don't know," Mary shrugged. "You are good at what you do. I'm actually surprised that you are still working on these assignments instead of passing them down to be handled by your associates."

"I guess because when someone is spending a quarter of a million on advertising to Mercer Advertisings, they deserved my personal attention. After all, this firm was built on

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my skills, attention to detail, and a gift for knowing how to set new trends,” he spoke with conviction instead of conceitedness.

“Yeah, I get that by looking at this layout. That slogan is going to catch on, and you're going to hear it everywhere. Especially the jingle, it's already playing around and around in my head,” she chuckled. “Have you found an artist to record it yet?”

He shook his head. “No, do you have any ideas?”

“Well, the typical thing is to find someone ridiculously popular at the moment and make them a spokesperson.”

“I could do that, I have some great connections.” Alec scratched his chin, his lips pursed in thought.

“Yeah you could, or you can become your innovative old self and have a nationwide search for the new face, televise it, and let the people vote on who they want as the spokesperson. Open it to people of all backgrounds, sizes, and nationalities.”

“I strongly believe you may be on to something!” Alec couldn't help but turn in his chair and hug Mary, sitting in the chair next to him at her small cornered office desk.

With a catch of breath, he released her stunned by the warm tingling sensation spreading from where her soft cushioned breast pressed flatly against him. The sudden erection between his thighs caught him off his guard, and he placed some much-needed distance between them.

“Glad, I could help,” Mary said softly.

He wondered had she felt what he felt? Probably not, he was just so used to having assistants that were all over him, singing his praises and expecting him to give them a lifestyle that few could only dream of. Mary wasn't like the other women; he didn't sense she had a hidden agenda for accepting the position he offered.

“Mary, thank you for allowing me to interlope on your personal time.” He cleared the lump out of his throat. “I'll look over this last one, and then I promise I'll get out of your hair and allow you to rest.”

“No problem, I'll finish making these notes, and it will be perfect by the time you meet with the client. Considering it's going to be running at the Super Bowl, there's no reason to go with my suggestions if they aren't feasible.”

“I'm sure we can swing it no matter what,” Alec absently reached out to touch her hand next to him in reassurance, but she moved it to rest in her lap, as if to say she didn't want him touching her. For some reason it pained him to think that Mary may have agreed to work

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with him, but may not like him as a person.

In all fairness she didn't know him...not yet, and he didn't know much about her and surprisingly enough, for the first time in a long time, he wanted to get to know more about a woman, than her favorite wine and sexual position.

Alec lashes fluttered, realizing he was staring at Mary, he returned his concentration to the contracts before him. It last for about ten minutes. Almost against his will, he found his eyes drawn once more to her dark head bent so meticulously over the commercial sample sketches before her. She had released her hair from a tight bun and pulled it back into a hair *scrunchy*, he believed they were called, something none of the ladies he dated would be caught dead wearing in their hair. Neither would they change into those black leggings with an oversized white peasant top in his presence.

His eyes followed the blouse as it dropped off one creamy brown shoulder. Without taking her eyes off the project she pulled it back up. Alec tilted his head to one side, but no matter the angle, the picture was just as nice. Mary wasn't a supermodel or beauty queen gorgeous, in the way Erica, and the many other women he'd known over the years, was. Still, there was something about her...

The one thing he realized about the other women is the more time he spent with them the more unattractive they became. It seemed as if there was never any balance in the relationship.

Sometimes he wanted nice companionable evenings like this one, with deep conversations and laughing. A great face and body got his attention, but it wasn't enough to keep him interested. Regardless of how much Alec could appreciate a woman's outer beauty, his ego couldn't handle the nagging question of "*Is she with me, for me, or my money and notoriety?*" and eventually he would learn it was all about what he was and not who he was.

After being in her company and seeing her move about, he remembered seeing Mary making her way through the office, he had barely given her a second glance, but he could remember her kindness to her fellow employers. She seemed to remember names and birthdays.

If memory served him right, it was Mary who had given one of his ex-assistants a surprise engagement party on the job. He may never say anything but all that this woman had done around the office for everyone, hadn't gone unnoticed. She was well liked by all and had practically become the office entertainment director on her own accord. Always

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smiling, always giving, that is Mary, and she is a good person to have around.

Of course, his asking Mary unexpectedly to join him at the family holiday home had been spontaneous, but the more time he spent with her, the more he was happy, he made the decision. He looked forward to knowing more about her and seeing if she was the hard and diligent worker, she appeared to be, he suspected by the time they spent working this evening, she was. The thing he hadn't expected was, the more time he spent in her company, the more adorable she was becoming.

Mary looked up at him and smiled; pushing those foolishly large glasses that seem to continuously slip to the tip of her pudgy nose, back in place. She really did have the most incredible eyes he'd ever seen; it was a shame to hide them behind those glasses.

Alec realized she was talking to him. "I'm sorry, did you say something?"

"I asked, if you had found something I missed?"

"Oh, no, it looks wonderful!" Alec sputtered, trying to focus his attention on the corrected documents in front of him.

Mary raised her wrist to look at her watch. "You know it's almost midnight, so maybe we better go ahead and wrap this up. I need to get to the office early in the morning to get what we will need to draw up a new prospectus with a corrected pricelist."

He smiled and leaned back in his chair turning his full stare on her, "Does Cinderella turn into a pumpkin at midnight?"

"No, I'm already a pumpkin, so I actually turn into Cinderella when the lights are off." She laughed with lifted eyebrows.

"That's a good one," Alec teased. "I turn into a Prince, when the lights are off, because I'm considered a "toad" when their own."

"I very much doubt that. You're too handsome to be a toad," she said with ease.

"You find me handsome?" Alec couldn't keep down the warmth that spread through him.

Mary giggled, "I know, it's impossible to believe, right? Please, give a girl a break, I've already worked a ten hour day before you came here and took over, so at this point even Kermit the Frog would look sexy."

"So, does that mean you find me sexy too?" His surprised grin grew even wider, if that was possible.

"Oh God, I must be exhausted if I'm hearing the man voted to be one of the Sexiest Men on earth, fishing for compliments." Mary sat back in her seat with a playful chuckle.

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Alec sighed heavily, she was right. He was practically begging for it. "You're right, sorry to put you on the spot, I think I'm exhausted also."

"I don't feel as if you were putting me on the spot," she quipped.

He began closing and stacking the files that littered the desk. "That's beside the point. You saved me, fed me, been a gracious hostess and delightful company. I hope you realize how much your graciousness has meant to me tonight."

Mary regretted saying it the minute it came out of her mouth; not the fact that she found him handsome and sexy, but for turning it into a joke when it was the truth.

Sincere contriteness displayed in his eyes. It wasn't as if she had never noticed his remarkable bedroom eyes; a luminescent green, surrounding by absurdly long black lashes, so thick, it looked as if kohl lined his bottom lids.

She looked down at his tan, strong, vein-lined hand as it closed around hers in a gentle squeeze. "Truly, thank you. Take your time coming in tomorrow and sleep in tomorrow. I'll have Marge at the receptionist desk; she will be working up until we turn the phones over to the service. It will be waiting on your new desk outside my office, when you get there."

He really was a touchy feely person. She wondered if he realized that about himself. It didn't bother her because she came from a family of people that touched and hugged all the time. Still, his touch did unsettling things to her nervous system and made her feel foolishly reflective on things that weren't even a possibility.

"You don't have to do that, Mr. Mercer."

"Mary, if you call me by my father's name one more time, you're fired." He released her hand and reached for another file. "I'm just Alec or my friends and family call me Al. I don't feel right calling you by your first name, and you not do so in kind. The only times I expect formalities is in front of visiting clients."

Mary eyes grew round. She only heard the "fired" part. "You would really fire me if I slip up? I mean, I was raised to show my employers respect, and I may say it again, without meaning to. I..." Mary's voice faded as wrinkles of mirth surrounded his eyes. "Oh, okay, you got me."

"Are you always so serious?" he teased.

"No, but as I said, you make me nervous," Mary admitted.

"Well, I have to see what I can do about that. There is no way a woman with the name "Mary Christmas", can maintain one serious or nervous bone in her body."

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“Well, I’m not so bad with...” she paused as she followed his tongue. Just watching him casually moistened his lips was hot. “With people I know.”

Alec cocked his head to the side, his face spreading into an easy smile. “I suppose you best get to know me fast. After all, we’re going to be spending the holidays together in a secluded mountain hide away.”

Mary licked her lips, “Not...not alone.”

He shrugged, absently, placing the files in his briefcase. “Except for the caretakers on the ranch, and your parents; for the first week it will just be us.” He paused and a light frown creased his brow. “Mary, it never occurred to me, but I suppose it should have; you don’t know me from Adam. “Are you uncomfortable about being alone with me in general?”

“Of course not, Alec,” she reached out and took his hand. “I’ve been alone with you all evening haven’t I?”

“Yes.”

“Look, I didn’t mean to make it sound as if I was nervous because you were some ogre or something,” she explained. “It’s just you’re nothing like what I expected and this entire evening has taken me by surprise.”

“May I ask what you'd expected?”

She had no idea.

“Let me guess, you assumed I was some tight-ass, Ivy League, rich white boy womanizer with a silver spoon in my mouth, with no concern for the people less fortunate than myself?”

Mary felt her cheeks go warm, because earlier something similar had crossed her mind. Now, she felt different.

“Well, uh...truthfully, I really had no idea of what to expect, I’ve just seen you around the office and heard rumors...read some things. I suppose, from all that I’ve heard. I was shocked that you would hire me to be your assistant in the first place. I definitely didn’t expect to end up a guest in your home for a few weeks. ”

“I don’t know why not? You’re a hard worker, and I needed someone.”

“True, but because I’ve been at your company for two years I know that I’m not the usual type of assistants you like working closely with you. I’m by no means a supermodel or wannabe actress, by any means.”

Realizing she was still touching him, she pulled back her hand and held it fisted in her lap. Her heart pattered foolishly in her chest and moistness gathered between her thick

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thighs. She was embarrassed. She was actually reacting to him as a man. She wouldn't do this; he was her boss, an employer, and practically engaged.

Mary had to put her association with him back into perspective, just because he ate dinner and spent the evening in her home, it didn't mean it was a date or even the beginning of a deep friendship. He had a problem, and he paid her to help him solve it. That was all there was to it.

Her eyes connected with his and swallowed the newly formed lump in her throat.

"Do I really seem that shallow to you?" He sighed. "I'm sorry, Mary, I didn't mean to get on the defensive. It's just I've worked hard to become the man I am today. My family wasn't suffering, but I come from a middle-class family. Dad is a retired physician and my mom, a retired teacher." He slowly smiled. "The only silver spoon that was in my house as a kid is in a case nestled next to the good china, Mom, only brings out for guest and holidays."

Mary laughed. "My mom does that too."

"Really? See we have something in common, probably more, once we get to know each other better." He assured her. "What do your parents do?"

"My father, Joseph, is a retired veterinarian and my mother, Miriam, was a nurse, but she had a difficult time conceiving and when I finally came to them late in life, she became a stay at home mom."

"So, you're an only child."

"Unfortunately. How about you?" She inquired. "You mentioned you had a brother deceased. I admit I heard about him dying in Iraq when it happened. I sent a card and flowers to the funeral home, along with donating to the Disable American Veterans fund in Ben Mercer's name."

"That was a surreal time for me and my family, so I hardly remember anything about it but the pain and disbelief over the entire situation. I do know I personally ordered "thank you" cards and asked my assistant at the time to send them out."

"Maybe mine got lost in the mail, but I and I'm sure everyone else understood. We all have dealt with grief and know how crazy it can get during that time." Mary placed a hand on his and squeezed it before releasing it. "I can't imagine how many condolences you must have received being a public figure."

"Still, it's embarrassing to think, those who took the time to send something, didn't get thanked for the thought. My mother would be mortified. She hand wrote all the ones she

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received a thank you letter,” his voice faltered. “Thank you, Mary. I’m sorry it’s a long time coming.”

“Your assistant at that time was, Leslie Foster. She was out of there a couple of days after you lost your brother, she probably didn't get the chance, to follow up,” Mary supplied.

Alec's eyebrows touched in a deep frown. “Leslie Foster? Ooh yes,” he nodded his head and released a derisive snort. “I remember her. She left because she was upset by the fact I didn't want her to accompany me to my brother's funeral. She accused me of not wanting her to meet my immediate family.”

Mary scowled. “That's no excuse to leave you high and dry when you needed her the most. You were grieving, it wasn't an appropriate time to be meeting your parents.”

Alec gave her a half smile. “Thank you for placing me in a justified light, but she had been right. My family is personal, and I don't just introduce any woman to them. I try to keep my parents out of all this public hype as much as possible.”

“What about during your holidays with your family, do you usually go alone?” Mary asked, realized she was being personal, but curiosity about him won out over good manners.

“The ones that have accompanied me to the holiday home were only with me during the week before the rest of the family arrived.”

Mary lifted an eyebrow in shock. “I'm surprised to hear that, since I'm supposed to bringing my family and spend time with you and your family.”

“It's different, we're not sleeping together.” He pointed out, with a lingering stare at her mouth before looking away. “I suppose, I always felt that if my mother, saw me with a woman during the time they were at the ranch, she would surmise it was a serious relationship, and it would give her hope. My marrying and having children is at the top of my mother's Christmas wish list.”

He looked at her again and grinned, once more his eyes seemed to be searching her face. Yet, he didn't say anything.

Mary could feel her heart racing from the way he had stared at her. She wondered what he had been thinking in those few moments.

“Was Ben, your only sibling?”

He swallowed deeply and nodded.

Mary found herself touching him again as her hand reached out to cover his. She didn't do it intentionally, but she wouldn't have done any less for another employee that needed comfort in the office.

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"I understand that your pain of your loss is still fresh. I can never know what it feels like to lose a brother, but I lost...I lost, a cousin within the first year they went over there. I wish I could say it gets easier within time, however, it doesn't."

"No, it doesn't," he agreed. "So, is it only you and your parents?"

"Oh God, no," Mary chuckled. "My parents have sixteen brothers and sisters between them, and it makes for a huge family, with more cousins, than I can remember. Yet, the cousin I lost, Jamie, well, I miss her so much. She was my running partner. We'd go to karaoke and sing and dance the night away."

"Man, don't I know it." His eyes darted around the room in frustration. "That's the worse thing about losing a loved one isn't it, Mary? Suddenly, all the things you're use to doing with them seems so significant to your entire life, when at the time, it was just another thing that you had to find time to do."

He sniffled, shifting uncomfortably in the chair he continued, "Ben, and I use to shoot pool and work out together. Now, when I do those things with other people I just feel so damned guilty for being alive while he's not." He stood abruptly causing the chair he occupied to roll back on its wheels.

Staring up into his eyes, she realized they had forgotten he was her boss, she was his employer, and for the moment, they were just two people sharing the pain of losing a loved one. Alec was a man, in a lot of pain over the loss of his brother, and she wondered if he even realized that he had yet to truly grieve over his loss. He probably has been playing the position of supportive son for his parents' sake, and hadn't had the opportunity to deal with the fact that he too had lost something very precious.

Mary's heart went out to him, and she couldn't stop herself. She stood and faced him, wrapping her arms around his broad shoulders. "It's okay to feel sad, and in this case angry, because it all seems so senseless these days and times. After many years past of wars, there should never be nothing but peace, but as long as men find something to fight about, our families will die."

"How do I heal from the guilt, Mary?" Alec muttered. "I'm the eldest, and it's never crossed my mind to go and fight for this country. "Instead, I've written several checks to good causes and considered my civil duties done." His hold tightened on her as he returned her comforting hug. "My brother was the better man, and he died because of it."

Mary shook her head against his shoulder. "You can't think like that, Alec, we all have our calling in this world and yes, your brother died for his country which is very noble, but

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now he can't do anything else. You are alive and in a position to continue helping and there is so much need right here at home. We our fighting a battle in our own streets against drugs, and the abuse, hunger, and lack of medical care of our citizens."

She leaned back to look up at him. "You, have to choose your battles. A check and an ink pen can change the ordinary lives of hundreds, be it here or written to one of the many causes worldwide. You're doing what you can. You became a man of means, and you're sharing that wealth with other causes. It is noble. Many just keep getting richer and act as if the world owes it to them. They don't feel the need to share because their heart tells them to. They do so because it's a tax break."

He laughed, his voice husky with emotions. "Hey, don't knock a good tax break."

She smiled, sharing his humor. Playfully she jabbed him with a finger in his side. "*You*, know what I'm saying."

He nodded. His hands resting gently on her round shoulders, "Yeah, I know." He blew out a long breath. "I also know you're good for an ailing spirit, Ms. Mary Christmas."

Suddenly Mary was very aware of how close they stood together, his chest almost touched her breasts. His hands were on the curve of her shoulders and hers rested on his lean waist. Bewilderment held her still, and the debts of his searching eyes stole her breath.

She felt something happening to her, warming up her insides, a thawing of her defenses. She had no control over these unfamiliar sensations, and it terrified her. This just wasn't any man making her feel this way. It was Alec Mercer, touted as one of the magazines top "100 Beautiful People of the World", and another called him "The Bachelor of the Decade".

Here stood the "Hunk of the Month", standing in her small townhouse apartment just a breath away from her lips and all she could think of was...nothing logical. Her mind was a void of all thoughts, except for one. *I want him to kiss me.*

Needing a distraction Mary broke the sexually charged silence, "I'm glad I can help you feel somewhat better," she whispered. "Would you like to take some leftover Chinese food home with you?"

He picked up a strand of dark brown hair that must have come loose from the scrunchy at the nape of her neck when she changed clothing. "I suppose I did get carried away on ordering, didn't I?"

She managed to nod.

"I hate it when I get a taste for something and I'm not sure what it is, I end up buying almost everything on the menu trying to figure out exactly what I'm hungry for. Don't

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worry I put it on my card, paying for dinner is the least I can do, for coming to your home, to work.”

“Did you finally figure it out?” She asked.

“Figure out what?”

“What you were hungry for?”

“No. I still feel...hungry.”

“Yeah,” she fully understood. She was hungry too, but it wasn't for food. Wow, that had to be a first. She finally desired something more than a meal. She desired Alec.

So much so, she was actually aching, she realized. She wanted to ask him to stay, to let her first complete sexual act to be with someone like him, handsome and experienced. She desired to savor his mouth on hers and discover the texture of his tongue.

Her face tilted up to his. He leaned into hers, his lips so close she could feel the air from his nose dusting across her face. Her body stiffened. *Oh, God he's going to kiss me*, she thought.

Mary was thinking about all the possibilities if she would just give in to this moment. Yet, instinctively she knew it wasn't possible. The moment she removed her clothing, and he saw her scarred body, his desire would crumble at her feet, just like Cinderella's ball gown before she had to change back into her rags.

She stumbled back against the chair pushing it aside. “How about I leave you to finish up in here, and I will go to the kitchen. You have to take home some of those leftovers. The *Lo Mein* noodles are excellent cold.”

“Mary.” Alec called her name softly and reached for her; she skirted around him rushing out the door, down the hall towards the kitchen.

Mary reached the kitchen on trembling limbs, not quite sure how she managed without embarrassing herself. Out of breath, she leaned against the refrigerator, her forehead pressed against the cool stainless steel as she waited for her heartbeat to slow down. Whatever Alec was going to say or do, she didn't want to risk finding out. He was about to kiss her, and she wanted him to. She wondered if she ever wanted anything more, then she wanted Alec Mercer at that moment. Was she crazy? Stuff like this didn't happen to her.

It was smart to walk away, and once she faced him again with his food, she would pretend like the moment where they almost kissed never happened. There were no reasons to ruin an otherwise, great evening.

She didn't want to hear the speech she knew would come of him telling her all the

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reasons why anything beyond being co-workers was out of the question. She also didn't want to hear him tell her that she needed to go back and work with Mr. Owens after all. How could she have been so stupid, touching him with such familiarity? She hugged the man for chrissake!

If Alec Mercer had planned to say any of those things, Mary wasn't going to find out tonight. When she came out of the kitchen with a loaded bag of food in her hands, he was gone.

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CHAPTER FOUR

It was nine o'clock sharp Alec slowly walked into his office the following morning stifling a yawn. Considering the argument he had with Erica on the phone for renegeing on their scheduled dinner date, it wasn't surprising that he didn't get any sleep. Yet he couldn't blame his lack of rest on thoughts for Erica seeing how she wasn't the woman that had him staring up at his bedroom ceiling in thought until four in the morning.

Mary, sweet Mary did you fall asleep with ease or were you thinking about me while I was thinking about you? Was she disappointed when she found that he had left without saying his goodbyes? In his wildest imaginings he would never have thought he could spend such an enjoyable evening in the company of a woman he wasn't sleeping with.

He couldn't believe how well they meshed. The times they were discussing work, Mary would finish his sentences as if she could read his mind. It was disconcerting, but also strangely relaxing, knowing someone could be so like-of-mind enough that conversation flowed and crescendo with such ease. When the Chinese deliveryman arrived with their called in order, he listened to her laugh and speak with him in Mandarin as if she was born to the language.

He was impressed and curious as hell to know what other little surprises she held behind that broad smile and calm exterior. As the evening progressed he learned she could be playful and yet serious when it came to working with numbers and grafts.

Alec shook his head; his brows drew together in puzzlement. How was it he was sitting here whiling away thinking about this cute chubby black woman he hadn't even noticed except fleetingly by her kindness about his office?

Maybe, this *thing*, linking them was not a "thing" at all. Just maybe, it was the fact that for the first time, he was dealing one-on-one with a woman that he didn't find in the least bit sexually attractive. This could be what it felt like to have a friendship with a woman.

It was like what he had with Ally; only, he had slept with her when they were testing to see if they should be more than friends. Soon afterwards, even though the sex was good, for

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him at least, it only confirmed to Allison what she already knew. She was gay. Today they still laughed at their attempt at being lovers, yet it only strengthened their friendship, and like most good buddies, they were usually attracted to the same type of women.

He wondered what Ally would say if he told her he thought he was smitten by this chubby *munchkin* of a woman. It defies all his past history dating choices. Was he going crazy or what?

Alec once again wondered about that moment that passed between them? The moment he wanted to kiss Mary, more than taking his next breath. Corny, he knew, but it was the truth and he spent all night going over it in his head.

As if conjuring her up with his persistent thoughts of her, Mary appeared at his office door with a cup in her hand. His eyes roamed over her, taking in the flush that tinged her lovely face.

“Good morning, Sir, I have your coffee; black, with one container of cream and two packets of sugar.” She gave him a warm smile.

Alec breathe a sigh of relief, he though she would come in this morning full of questions and expectations about what passed between them the night before or at the very least ask him why he skipped out on her without his leftover food.

“How did you know?” His brow cocked upwards in surprise.

“Last night. While we were working, I noticed,” Mary mumbled.

“You look like you need that coffee more than I do. Did you get any sleep?” Alec asked noticing the suspicious puffy dark rings beneath her eyes.

Mary came further into his office. She placed the cup with several napkins on his desk before him. “I prefer hot chocolate and whipped cream. I only need about six hours sleep and I’m good to go.”

Alec couldn’t believe he was the one bringing up last night, but someone needed to. Mary was waltzing around this morning as if nothing had happened. What in the world was he thinking? Maybe it was best if he did the same.

Even though he decided to keep his mouth shut he found himself saying, “I apologize for leaving without saying thank you and goodnight.”

“No problem.” Mary shrugged and smiled at him “I brought the leftovers to the guys in security, so it won’t be wasted.”

“Mary--” He caught her fixed look with his own.

“I’ve checked your calendar, there wasn’t much on it until after the New Year since you

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had already planned on this month long get away.” Mary looked down at the notebook she was holding in her other hand.

“So you aren’t upset about last night.” His brow puckered in a frown. Where was the drama, the questions? Had he misread her reaction to being close to him? Had the feel of his body pressed against hers not affected her at all when she hugged and comforted him?

“Why should I be, I understand you’re a busy man. Besides, we were finish with work and it was a very productive night. We accomplished much in a very short time, don’t you think?” She pushed her glasses up off the tip of her nose. “Which reminds me, I need the files that are in your briefcase so that I can make copies before the courier gets here.”

There was something different about her today. Maybe it was the black pinstriped skirt and matching jacket. Her curves appeared more luscious instead of overweight. He also liked the way she wore her hair today with the wisps of hair encircling and softening the lines of her face. She still wore a bun at the nape of her neck but it wasn’t as tight, it was more of a loose knot today and very becoming on her round full face.

“Do you want me to come back for the files later and send it out with the evening courier? If so, I can go and finish sending out the Christmas cards. I thought it would be best to handwrite a personal note inside for each client, then I will run them through your printer for your signature.”

“Mary, about last night--”

She continued to rattle on as if he hadn’t said a word, but Alec refused to *pretend* like nothing had happened, as she seemed to be doing.

“Mary what time did you get in this morning?” He interrupted her loudly.

“Six o’clock,” she answered. “I guess I need to get to those cards.”

“I left well after midnight, so you didn’t get six hours sleep,” Alec pointed out. For some reason the thoughts of her being as restless as he had been, made him feel better. “Mary, Didn’t I tell you to sleep in today?”

Mary shrugged. “You did.”

“So why didn’t you?”

Mary looked up from her tablet. “It wasn’t necessary.”

“Mary, last night I enjoyed being with you...very much.”

Yeah, he said it. He was the dumb ass that once again brought the conversation back to the night before. What was wrong with him? Why couldn’t he just follow her lead and let it go. He always wished women wouldn’t talk about things that happened the night before to

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death, and he'd finally found a woman that didn't want to talk about it at all, and he couldn't keep his mouth shut.

"Huh?"

He saw her mouth drop wide, her damnable glasses slipping to the tip of her nose.

"I...I was going to show you how much before you ran out of your office." There he said it, the purple elephant in the room had farted and now they would move past it and never speak of it again.

Mary touched the side of her face, a gesture that showed anxiousness and if that didn't give her away, her etching towards the door did.

Alec got up from his seat rushing towards her he placed a firm hand on her shoulder, stopping her. "Mary, don't even think about running again. We need to discuss this. I don't want this to become a problem in our working relationship."

"It's not a problem for me, as you see, *I'm working.*" Mary groaned. "What you doing?"

"At the moment speaking with you," He raised a brow, dropped his hand from her shoulder, and slid them into his black trouser pockets. He hoped it would keep him from touching her.

For some unknown reason he always ended up touching her shoulder, her hands, tucking stray tendrils behind her ear, everything he shouldn't be doing as her employer. Mary wasn't like the others; she wasn't here with an ulterior motive. All he needed was one of the few black women in his office filing a sexual harassment suit against him. Okay, it was time to clear the air and make sure all was well between them.

"Alec, are you trying to tell me you want me to go back to working for Mr. Owens?"

"Of course not," he answered quickly. Maybe too quickly because she looked startled by his answer. "Look, I'm just trying to say, there's no reason for you to feel uncomfortable with me, or fear that I was coming on to you. I was talking about my brother and feeling vulnerable, that's all."

"I wasn't uncomfortable," Mary's voice rose an octave. "That is, not until now. This is making me uncomfortable. There is no need to discuss something that didn't happen and I can tell the difference between attraction and vulnerability."

"Really?"

"Of course," she released a nervous giggle. "You were vulnerable, that's all it was. Of course you wouldn't be attracted to someone like me. I just happened to be the one there

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when you decided to open up about your brother.”

“You believe I don’t find you attractive?” Alec asked. “Mary, do you honestly think what happened between *us* was just my feeling vulnerable? You didn’t feel anything at all, you were just giving me a shoulder to cry on, is what you’re saying.”

Why was he offended, isn’t that the excuse he’d just given her. Why did it sound insulting to him coming from her mouth? Did she truly think he didn’t find her attractive? Well, she wasn’t his normal type, but the erection he had thinking about Mary last night, wasn’t some fluke of nature.

“*Us!* What *us*?” Mary shrieked. With a calmer voice she said, “Mr. Mercer, I think you are making a big deal over nothing. Of course, I think that is all it was. I’ve seen the type of women you’ve dated in those magazines. *None* of them look like me.”

“You want me to fire you don’t you?”

“What?” Mary crossed her arms over her ample breasts and cocked an eyebrow. “Hell, no, I don’t want to be fired, but at this point I will be more than happy to return to my position with Mr. Owens, which would mean, I would be on my month long Christmas holiday about now, and not having this foolish discussion with you!”

“Excuse me!” Alec laughed and spread his palms wide. “I was just teasing. Remember, I told you I’d fire you if you called me “Mr. Mercer” again?”

“Geeze,” Mary rolled her eyes. With a deep sigh she dropped her hands by her side the ink pin pattering against her thigh as her agitation grew. “Look, how about we start fresh. I know you aren’t attracted to me romantically, and I’m not attracted to you. Now enough said about the subject.”

“You’re right.” Alec nodded in agreement. This was a good time to let it drop. Every one was happy and life could go back to...wait a minute, did she say she wasn’t attracted to him? Why not? What was wrong with him? “Why don’t you find me attractive, Mary? Is it because I’m white?”

“Oh Lord, help me Jesus, here we go,” Mary threw up her hands. “Alec, did you get any sleep last night, because you aren’t making any sense to me, this morning.”

Alec smiled foolishly. He liked the way she said it in that southern throaty smoky voice that made him have such wicked thoughts of rolling naked beneath sweeping willow trees. He could picture himself lifting ice cubes from a glass of iced tea, trailing it down the length of those thick brown thighs.

He cleared his throat and eyed her from head to toe. “No, I didn’t get any sleep last

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night.” Alec’s inspection roamed back to her face and the soft look he found there caught him by surprise.

“I’m sorry, Alec, I suppose our speaking of your brother made it hard for you to sleep.”

“Actually, that is not what kept me awake,” he replied.

“It isn’t. Was it something to do with the contracts? You know I went over them again and everything is fine now,” she halted as he began to shake his head. “Not the contract? Then what?”

“Not what, but who, Mary.” He gave her an accessing look. “It was you. Every time I closed my eyes I could see your face.”

“Me,” she said, sounding surprised. “Yeah right.”

“Don’t look at me that way. I’m not making this up, Mary. I’m as surprised by this as much as you are.” Alec confessed.

“This can’t be real,” Mary murmured.

“That’s what I said,” he shrugged with amazement. “After you left my office last night, every time I thought about your name, Mary Christmas, I couldn’t help but grin like an idiot. Nor could I miss the irony of meeting you just when I needed help desperately, and this close to Christmas...I felt as if it was a sign.”

“What kind of sign?” she encouraged.

“Every Christmas, my mother lights a candle for me. For the past fifteen years, she’s made the same wish and it had me thinking, just maybe...” He looked at his feet. “I don’t know what to think.” Alec sighed, feeling awkward. Never had he been so open and honest with a woman about his feelings or his personal life, not even with the woman he was planning to ask to be his wife. What is it about Mary?

“You’re saying that you think that I’m a Christmas wish your mother made sent to you?”

“I’m saying, as crazy as it sounds; just when I needed someone, you miraculous walked into my office, and when I couldn’t find the discrepancy between the contract and proposal, you came to mind. Once again, *you* saved me.”

“I’m flattered, but I think you need to go over there and lie down on that nice comfy sofa take a nap, you’re talking nonsense.” Mary’s skepticism was written all over her face.

“Mary, you’re magical,” Alec said seriously.

“Alec, I dropped off some papers and you needed help. There isn’t anything special about me; I’m being a good assistant. Speaking of work, I need to get back to it.”

She moved towards the door and Alec blocked it. Alec looked at her biting down on her

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full bottom lip nervously. He didn't care what she said; there was something very magical about her.

"Don't leave yet. Please. Yesterday when you left my office and I wanted...no needed, to see you again," he said honestly. "So tell me why would I feel that way? I don't know you that well, but yet, when you're around I feel as if I've known you all my life. Also being with you makes me remember things I haven't thought about for years."

Curiosity must have gotten the best of her because she asked, "Such as?"

Alec's mouth spread into a wide grin. "My first train set as a boy, snow ball fights with my brother out at the ranch, my Me-Maw's silver Christmas tree with the color wheel--"

"Oh my God, my Granny had one of those," Mary giggled. "I sat and watched that stupid thing for hours. Green, red, blue and yellow."

Alec like the way her big brown eyes crinkled at the corners behind her glasses when she laughed. He chuckled. "When I was a boy, Christmas was my favorite time of the year. I remember standing on a chair to help cut out gingerbread cookies because I was too short to reach the counters. Oh, and the smell of mom's turkey roasting on low all night."

"Yeah, for me it was putting icing on the chocolate cake and the smell of ham baking through the night." Mary sighed rubbing her round belly. "I'd wake up starving in the morning after dreaming of food all night, because of the smells and Granny would slice us pieces of ham we could stuff in homemade biscuits for breakfast."

"Such sweet memories." He nodded in agreement. "I was the first to wake up Christmas morning and I checked to make sure the cookies I left out for Santa were gone, before I did anything else."

"You know I heard Santa once," Mary spoke softly as if it was a secret she'd never shared with anyone.

Alec snorted and received a punch in his shoulder.

"Don't look at me that way," Mary protested. "I did! I woke up before sunrise Christmas morning and I heard Santa say *"Ho-ho-ho-Merry Christmas!"*

He couldn't help but laugh at her pretend Santa voice. She was adorable.

"Never mind," Mary pouted. "I never suspected you were big on Christmas!"

"Why? I love Christmas. I work like a dog all year, but I manage to take two weeks before Christmas and up till the day after New Years to spend with family and friends."

"Oh really, and that's why you're taking me and your work to the family getaway, because you're managing to take the holiday? I don't think so. I wouldn't be needed if you

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hadn't planned on working."

"I didn't get rich by being lax. Besides, I like what I do and if I didn't do it this way, I couldn't shut down shop for my employees to have time off during this time of year."

"I can tell you like being in the advertising field. I have admired your work for some time now." Mary looked him in the eyes.

A big smile came to his face. "Thank you, that means a lot coming from you."

"I enjoyed your company too, last night." Mary released a deep sigh. "But don't worry, as I said, I realized that you needed help and I'm good at what I do, so why not think to come to me and ask for help." She surprised him by winking at him. "See nothing magical about making a logical last minute decision."

"Humph." His eyes drifted to her mouth. "Ms. Mary Christmas, I would have thought you would have more faith in this *Christmas Magic* theory than I would."

"Why because of my name? Sometimes a girl has to be logical about such things otherwise, she's bound to start wishing for all kinds of impossible things becoming possible."

"Nothing is impossible," Alec said moving closer. "Also, nothing you have said explains why my thoughts kept me thinking about you all night."

"What exactly about me were you thinking? Maybe I can help you figure it out," Mary offered.

Alec nodded and grinned at her. "Oh, yeah, I believe only *you* can help me, Mary"

"Well, that's what you pay me for. So what's the problem?"

"Well, if you don't mind I would like to have this one off the clock because I don't want you to feel as if you're obligated to follow through." Alec confidently spoke the words.

"One what?" She tilted her head to the side in question.

"One kiss. May I kiss you?"

"Wh...what?" Her mouth dropped wide in surprise, he couldn't much blame her because he was surprised he had the nerve to actually ask. Alec only knew he couldn't spend another sleepless night wondering if her lips were as soft as they looked.

"You don't have to kiss me if you don't want, Mary," Alec rushed out, not wanting her to get the wrong idea about his request. "It's not like your job depends on this. It's just you have such wonderful full lips and when we're this close all I can do is wonder what it would feel like to kiss them."

"Alec, I believe you can't imagine working with a woman you're not intimate with." Mary reasoned softly. "I imagine at this point you're wanting to give yourself a reason to

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return to what you're use to and I'm not it. I'm not the type of woman that plays *footsy* with the boss. We haven't signed any contracts yet, so you can call the temporary service and have them to send out your usual, bimbo with a brain," she finished sarcastically.

"I see. So, you're telling me I don't really want to kiss you, even though I find you totally kissable?" he asked as his contemplation dropped from her eyes to her mouth.

"Alec--"

"Mary, are you about to tell me, that I rather kiss one of those women instead of you?"

"Yeah, exactly." Mary agreed dryly. Then she laughed and shook her head.

"What's so funny?"

"You had me going," she giggled. "Are you testing me? Are you trying to see if I would swoon under those bedroom eyes of yours and wilt with desire from that deep sexy voice like your previous assistants."

Alec cocked his head to the side and crossed his arms across his chest gazing at her as she slapped the tablet in her hand against her leg in laughter. He couldn't believe she was so clueless and at her age.

"You," she continued to laugh aloud. "Me? That's so hilarious. Bring out the hidden cameras. What are you going to do show this after the family dinner, so you all could get a big laugh?" Her laughter died down and suddenly her eyes were bright with unshed tears.

"Oh, damn," he muttered not seeing the humor, considering he was being serious and sincere. Without another word, Alec swept Mary into his arms and kissed her until they both were breathless, until his closed eyes crossed, until he was sure of one thing; he liked kissing Mary and while he was doing so he didn't have visions of supermodels dancing in his head, just her, and she was driving him crazy.

Mary felt genuine relief after Alec excused himself after kissing her. She didn't think she could come up with something proper to say even if her life depended upon it.

On wobbly knees she felt her way into the chair not far behind her located in front of Alec's desk. She placed her elbows on top of the desk's mahogany surface and held her head in her hands. The pen and tablet she had been holding was discarded on the floor, once he pulled her into his arms.

What just happened? Why in the world would he want to kiss her in the first place? Well, it wasn't as if she weren't kissable; she just didn't think a man that dated the type of women he escorted around town would give her a second glance, and kissing her, that way

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was too bazaar for words.

The one thing Mary simply couldn't deny was that she found Alec attractive and sexy. *Really sexy*, she thought. There was something so naturally masculine, openly aggressive and self-assured about him that made her feel vulnerable and needy. The feelings scared the hell out of her. What was she expected to do with them? She never felt this way before.

Mary touched her lips. She could still feel him. Still taste the coffee tainted sweetness he left in her mouth as his tongue swept against hers. She'd never been with a man and as the years went by with no possibilities it was getting easier to tell herself she didn't want one. Her life was just fine and she definitely didn't need this multi-millionaire playboy thinking he can add her to his long list of forgotten lovers, just because he knew he could.

With a deep moan, Mary's head thudded onto the desk. "Dear *GOD*, what am I going to do? I know that I lit a candle and prayed for you to bless my life with love, that is, if you desire that to be the path in my life."

"*Lord*, this man, well, you can't get much more "opposite" than Alec and me and I know, opposites do attract, but how often does it last? I mean, get real, how could it?" Mary sighed and added. "You know what's best for me. Give me a sign...please."

"Hello?"

Mary cried out, startled by the unexpected feminine voice behind her. The office building was supposed to be empty for the holidays, except for her, Alec and the two guys in security. Mary glanced over her shoulder and found a tall immaculately dressed, slender black woman hovering in the doorway.

Quickly she stood up brushing the wrinkles from her skirt. "Hello, I'm sorry I didn't realize anyone else was in the building today." Mary pushed her glasses up off the tip of her nose and craned her neck to look up at the tall beautiful woman. She had to be almost as tall as Alec. Mary knew Alec had no appointments, so who was she? Was she here to see Alec? After the kiss had he called the infamous Allison James Beauty and Brains, temporary service to send over her replacement?

"Are you alright? You seemed a bit flushed," the beauty said. "Maybe you should sit back down."

"I...I'm fine." Mary fidgeted. "My name is Mary Christmas, can I help you with something?"

"You got to be kidding." The woman's mouth spread in wide grin. Her teeth were long and blinding white against the backdrop of her flawless ebony skin. "With a last name like

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Christmas your parents named you, *Mary*?”

Mary smiled and nodded as she always did when someone had a reaction in regards to her name, and there’s always a reaction. “Yup, my parents’ have a great sense of humor, but they were right about one thing...it’s an immediate ice breaker.”

“Yeah, I guess a sistha has to learn to roll with the punches growing up with a name like that. I mean, you can’t even think of your name or say it without smiling. Maybe there’s something to your parents’ reasoning after all.” The woman winked.

Mary chuckled and crossed her arms across her breasts as she arched back just to be able to look into her accessing eyes. “Uh, was Mr. Mercer, expecting you?”

“No, probably not, but I have a standing open invitation. No appointment is necessary.” The woman paused; cocked her head to the side, and said, “You can tell me to mind my own business, but do you always hold such heavy conversations with yourself?”

Mary blushed staring down at her feet her glasses slid down her nose. “You heard all that, huh.” She looked back up with a deep sigh.

“Enough to know it sounds like you may be having some man woes.” The woman moved forward with her hand extended. “By the way, I’m Allison James, a friend of Alec’s.”

“Oh, now it’s my turn to be surprised.” Mary laughed taking the woman’s hand and shaking it in greeting. “So you’re the Allison James that keeps sending the hussies with brains.”

Allison laughed out, releasing Mary’s hand. She went to sit behind Alec’s desk and put her mile-long legs up on his desk, crossing one booted heel ankle over the other. “You mean my reputation has got it like that around here?” She threw back her head with and let out a loud squeal. “Guilty, girl, I’m so...so guilty as charged.”

Mary couldn’t help but like her, she was chic, sexy, beautiful and not afraid to sport a boy-short natural hairdo. However, with her supermodel appearance, she pulled off her entire look elegantly. She couldn’t help but stare in envy at her.

She said she was a “friend” of Alec’s. Mary wondered, just how friendly were they?

Seeing Allison James for herself, she now understood why the woman had a penchant for hiring model statuesque women in her company. Mary didn’t like it, but she also couldn’t hate a sistha for being a smart businesswoman, everyone knows beauty and sex sales.

“Ms. James, I’ve read your portfolio in *Business Weekly*, so regardless of the fact that I

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believe you should add a little bit more versatility to your stable, I can forgive you for it.” Mary smiled and cocked a sarcastic brow.

“Ha! No, you didn’t.” Allison threw back her head and laughed again. “I like you. I love him, but damn, if he don’t know how to take a break and live a little. What kind of boss lets their people off for a month during the holiday-sweeps and takes up the slack with just himself and some poor assistant. That’s why he can’t keep them.”

Mary rolled her eyes. “Really? I thought he couldn’t keep them because he couldn’t keep his zipper up.”

Both women laughed.

“That too. However, dogs run together and I have no room to bark up his tree.” Allison said with a flip of her wrist, bracelets shuffled and clicked together.

Mary confessed. “I’m the “poor assistant” that will be spending the holidays working and I don’t mind hard work. Also I doubt I have to worry about the boss’s zipper,” she laughed nervously.

Allison’s eyes narrowed on her as she eyed her from head to toe in the same infuriating way that Alec had a way of doing from time to time. Just like with Alec, Mary suddenly felt as if she was standing there naked and flushed.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that Ms. Mary Christmas, there is something about you that I can’t quite put my finger on,” Allison murmured tapping a red manicured nail against her high cheekbones.

Mary was speechless. Was she saying that Alec would be interested in her? That was impossible. Yeah, he kissed her, but he was just curious and it hadn’t been the first time a man had told her she had nice lips. It was just the first time one had done something about it. It took Mary a moment to realize Allison had moved the conversation back to something of a less personal nature, in which she was thankful.

“I should be pissed that Al has hired you, because he has a contract with me for at least another six months.”

“Well it’s a good thing for you that he did and that he’s a friend because the last *assistant* you sent him made a huge monetary mistake that could have cost the company big time and if that had happened, Ms. James, I recommended he allowed the expense to roll back onto you. I read the contract, you are liable for the reputation and abilities of the women hired, regardless of their outer appearances,” Mary pointed out.

Allison released a moan and pinched the bridge of her nose. “I know and that’s why I’m

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here, to discuss what happened and to apologize.”

“Why? Because the error wasn’t a mistake at all?” Mary questioned, already knowing the answer.

“You are good.” Allison clucked her tongue. “I need you working for me.”

“I tried, but I couldn’t get past the receptionist in your offices either. By the way, you might need to tell them to go through the pretense that they’re accepting applications from everyone.” Mary jabbed; she couldn’t help it,

Job discrimination in any manner pissed her off. Worse, beauty being a requirement was ridiculous, seeing how it was something in the “eye of the beholder”. How were the restaurants, clubs, and bikini carwashes hiring only women of a certain look, or with certain bra cup sizes able to continue such practices? Why was this acceptable in these days and times?

“You know what Mary? I must be finally growing up, like Al, because I’m too, am tired of all the drama with these ladies and their ulterior motives.” Allison shook her head. “Too many women are looking to be taken care of these days and by any means necessary. I tell you I’m not willing to risk everything I’ve built due to someone else’s behavior.”

“I assumed it was a behavior you condoned,” Mary stated.

“Regardless of what is written about me and my company, I don’t run an undercover whorehouse. They do all that banging on their own dime because I created this job to give a beautiful intelligent woman the ability to be seen for more than her looks.”

“That has to be a first.” Mary chuckled. “Are you trying to say that beautiful women are being discriminating upon too?”

“When I got tired of being a model, Mary. I tried to find a job to use the expensive education I have from Harvard. None of the men cared about my degrees and such. They made it obvious in what they were interested in,” Allison explained.

“I decided to use this newfound knowledge to my advantage and opened this agency. Unfortunately, not all the women that I hire look at the opportunity I am giving them to excel in this man’s world, by using their brains. They choose to use their looks and bodies, hoping to reel in men like Alec on a permanent basis. They are too shallow to realize, in Alec’s case that he is looking to marry and build a family with someone like his loving and sweet, *Mom*.

“So why is he always seen with the model types?” Mary asked, her curiosity getting the best of her.

“Because, it’s good free publicity and what many expect of him. It also doesn’t hurt that

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Alec, like a lot of people, enjoys a healthy sexual lifestyle and they are willing.” Allison clicked her booted heels together before dropping her feet from the desk to the ground. “I learned a lesson after Alec’s call requesting something of me that I didn’t have. He may be my friend, but he is also my biggest client. I should have been able to fulfill his needed requirements for an assistant.”

“True. You also should have seen to his welfare when it comes to his last assistant. Someone, at your agency is slipping on the background checks. It took me an hour to find out that Miss. Hillary Thornhill has a restraining order against her in California for stalking her previous employer. At another location, she received an undisclosed settlement to keep quiet and drop her sexual harassment law suit.”

A serious expression came to Allison’s face. “I have checked into that and all parties have been dealt with appropriately. I don’t hire people from the same family because of reasons such as this. This woman had a cousin in my office that falsified her records to get her a position in my company. I’m seeking legal actions against the both of them.

“Well, that is good to hear.” Mary nodded.

“Even though Alec has tried to assure me he wasn’t upset with me about what has happened, it’s because of my mistake, he’s been spending these last couple of weeks working harder than usual. He’s had to go through all his files and contracts over the past six months, making sure everything was accurate and because he is doing it on the down-low to protect my reputation, he’s been doing it alone.”

Mary felt a pain in her heart at the stress Alec must have been going through these past weeks, especially because he had taken it upon himself. It impressed her that he would go to such lengths for a friend.

“I’m trying to stick to my original standards, because I wanted to prove that all women that happened to be blessed at birth or through plastic surgery,” Ally laughed. “They all weren’t gold-diggers in disguise.” She sighed, her full lips pressing thin. “I swear, most of my ladies are professional and abide by my policies, Mary.”

Mary reached out and touched her hand. “I believe you and stuff like this happens, even to the best of us. Sometimes, it doesn’t even have to be about the money. It’s hard to work around someone as attractive as Mr. Mercer, who is also openly friendly, and not see it as an invitation to fall in love with him.”

“Is that how you feel being around Alec?” Allison’s head cocked to the side in question.

Mary could feel her ears burning. “No...God, no, I barely even know him.” She spoke

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loudly, or it seemed loud to her own ears.

Allison's eyes narrowed on her face and Mary realized her lie must have been written all over her face. She may not be in love with him, but she found him very sexy and attractive.

"I'm going to share something with you." The other woman leaned towards her, her hands clasped in front of her resting on the desk. "Ever since Alec's been rolling in the serious dollars, he's been burned in the relationship department more than the average guy."

"I don't know why you're telling me this. I'm just another Mercer employee." Mary giggled nervously, biting on her lower lip. "If I'm nothing else, I'm a hard worker and loyal to those deserving of it. If I find that I can no longer work with Alec for one reason or the other, I'll leave with the same ease that I came into this position unlike the hussy from hell you sent over here."

Allison threw her head back in laughter. "That is good to know and if for some reason that day comes," Allison removed a business card from an elegant silver case and slid it towards her across the desk. "You will always have a job with me. I'm looking for good hard working beautiful women." She smiled and added, "In all shapes and sizes."

"I will keep that in mind, but for now I know several hard working women I can send your way." Mary offered.

"Are they as pretty, diligent, outspoken, and loyal to their bosses as you are?" Allison questioned.

Before she could answer, Alec strolled into the office. "That's impossible Ally, for there is only one Mary, and she's mine." He paused next to his desk, shoving his hands in his trousers. "I see you ladies have already made fast friends, especially if my *best-bud*, Ms. Allison Grench, is trying to steal my, Mary Christmas, away from me."

Mary glanced over at Alec and caught his eye. For a moment, Allison's bold presence seemed to fade away and she and Alec were alone. He didn't have to touch her or even smile at her, but the look he gave her told her he too was remembering their kiss.

Once again she could feel him holding her tightly in his arms. His body molded against hers as if he was meant to be there. His kiss tasted of fresh roasted coffee and an essence that was all Alec. Mary felt breathless from the memory and it made her aware that she was going to have to be on her toes or risk losing her heart to this man.

"Uh...it was nice meeting you, but I have work to do," Mary muttered tearing her eyes from Alec to look at Allison.

"The pleasure is all mine, Mary." Allison stood and grabbed her hand and squeezed

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lightly. “Call me and we’ll do lunch. I’m sure Al won’t mind and by the way, be careful about speaking aloud to yourself, I could have been the person you were speaking about.”

Mary didn’t miss Allison’s pointed look at Alec. She was mortified. Allison had heard her talking to God about Alec. Her face reddened and she released Allison’s hand and scurried to the door. “Buzz me if either of you need anything.”

She hurriedly pulled the office door closed behind her. For a moment, she leaned against the door and stilled her overheated emotions. How was she going to spend an entire month on a snow-capped mountain knowing Alec was sleeping probably just a few steps away from where she was?

“What the hell was that about?”

“What?” Alec asked tugging Ally away from his chair and taking a seat.

“That long look that passed between you two.” Allison pointed out while dropping down in the seat that Mary had occupied. “I might as well have dissolved into the woodwork.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Alec shrugged, leafing through the notes and files Mary had left on his desk. It seemed like she had more energy after a night of non-sleep than he did. Now that he kissed her, he doubt, he would get any sleep tonight either. They had a long drive ahead of them tomorrow, so maybe he should pay Erica a visit and try to convince her to have makeup sex, since he won’t see her again until the following week, when she arrive with her parents in tow.

“Alec, we know each other too well, don’t play with me. I saw the way you and Mary looked at each other and then she hurried out of here. I hope you don’t plan to mess with her head. I don’t think she knows how to play the games we play. There’s something very sweet and innocent about her.” Allison said defensively causing Alec to look at her.

“What’s it to you? You’re interested in her for yourself or something?” Alec heard the harshness in his voice. What was wrong with him? Why was he feeling possessive about Mary? It wasn’t as if he truly wanted her for himself, or did he?

Allison threw up her hands. “What? Yes, I like her. I don’t know why and no, not the way, you’re implying.”

A wide relaxed grin spread across his face and he nodded in agreement. “Yeah, there is something about her. I like her to and no, I don’t intend to play games with her. After Hillary, I’m out of the game for good. I’m really ready to get married and settle down. This

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last year has been hell on me with so much bullshit.” Alec released a heavy sigh and leaned back in his chair.

“Al, I can’t apologize to you enough. I had no idea that woman was crazy.”

“Is crazy because I don’t think there is any help for her,” Alec’s dark eyebrows puckered in frustration. “No more casual sex for me, I’m getting too old for this and I’ve come to far, to loose it all over a some foolish woman’s fantasy that I was in love with her.”

“You still getting the hang-ups?”

“No, changed all my numbers, she wouldn’t dare call here knowing all calls are being recorded. Amazing, first she comes to me with some story that I got her pregnant.”

“That old stupid trick as if a man in your position wouldn’t want a paternity test.” Allison piped in.

“I’m sure some are stupid enough to take care of her while patiently waiting for the child to be born, and I may have done the same thing. Nevertheless, when I saw the date on the sonogram was 3 years old, that was the last straw for me.” Alec rubbed a hand over his burning eyes as fatigue settled about his shoulders.

“I reasoned she made this accounting nightmare of your invoices in hopes that you would call her back to help and she would swoop in save the day.”

“All I know is if these had gotten printed and mailed out, I would have been obligated to honor the set advertising rate if they forced the issue.” Alec ran a hand through his hair in disgust.

“Geeze, man, I am truly sorry. Is there anything I can do to help? I don’t mind being an extra pair of eyes,” Allison offered. “I feel like shit for not being on top of things. I didn’t know after all these years, I would still need to hold everyone’s hand.”

Alec’s face softened. “Ally, I don’t blame you. It’s hard to stay on top of things when the person you thought had earned your trust did the wrong thing for the right reasons.”

“Yeah, back in the day when I started this business there was loyalty, but these women these days are looking for an easy dollar and I must change with the times.” She admitted. “I’m going to restructure my business.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that, Ally, because friendship or not, if you can’t fill my required needs based on what they may be at the time, I will have to find someone who can.”

Allison nodded, “I can understand.”

“Good.” He grinned he rolled his tense shoulders beneath his jacket. “I want first dibs on any of those executive assistants recommended by Mary.”

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“So you heard that?”

“I heard a lot,” Alec confessed.

“I know you didn’t hear her prayers, because I was standing at the door, alone,” she pointed out.

“No, I heard that too.” He cleared his throat and shuffled through the files, not wishing to see the accusing glare Ally was probably giving him at the moment for ease dropping. “You can stop giving me the evil eye, Ally. It wasn’t intentional. I must have accidentally left the intercom on after my last call with the art department. When I went down there, I could hear your conversation through the phone.”

“Now that you know the girl is obviously falling for you, what are you going to do about it?”

Alec shifted in his chair. He didn’t want to have this conversation. He wasn’t sure how he felt about Mary supposedly private confessions, or his developing feelings for her.

“Ally, I don’t want to talk about Mary with you.” She lifted a questioning brow and he closed his eyes a moment before reopening them to see she was going to drop this. He knew the look. She was digging in her heels.

“Look, there is nothing to talk about. She’s cute and from what I can tell so far, very good at her job and we work well together. There’s nothing else to say.”

“Alec, you can’t even say her name without smiling and your eyes are damn near sparkling. I don’t think I’ve seen that look since--” she trailed off.

“You can say it Ally.” He chuckled. “Since my first crush, Beth Leslie, in middle school.”

“Al, I know the fellas made fun of you about the types of girls you were attracted to and even I had a laugh at your expense a time or two, but we were kids.” Allison reached out and took his hands in hers. “Hell, we aren’t kids anymore and all those guys are married with beer guts and a van full of kids. While you have all these women revolving in and out of your life and bed because you’re still trying to live up to expectation of others.”

“Geeze, Ally, that’s not what I’m doing. I have enjoyed the times I’ve spent with most of the women I’ve been with,” he defended his choices. “Also, I’ve already found the woman I’m going to marry, remember? That’s enough for me, so it should be enough for all of you!”

Ally took his hands in hers and tugged. “I can’t believe you’re sitting here lying to yourself. What’s up with that?”

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“What do you want from me Ally? I’m proposing to Erica, isn’t that enough?” Alec cursed and pulled his hands from hers. “I swear you and my mother are going to drive me fucking insane.”

“Al, Erica Fontaine is a socialite, with no talents of her own. Her career has been made by being seen on the arms of all the right men and she doesn’t have a sincere bone in her scrawny body,” Allison argued.

Alec groaned and gave her a hard stare. “It’s not even 10:30 yet and I’ve already had a long morning. So why don’t you cut me a break and let it go.”

“Just one more thing.”

“Go ahead, because you’re going to say it regardless,” he said as he ran his fingers through his hair in frustration.

“Damn straight. We’ve been friends since pre-school; I don’t care if I piss you off. I know you’ll forgive me.” Allison said bluntly. “Al, as I get closer to forty, I find I don’t care for the way things are in my life. I have everything I could need, accept for a loving relationship. I want to find a nice girl and settle down.”

“So do I,” he agreed. “That’s why I’m making my intentions for Erica clear to you and my family during the Christmas holiday.” His scowl deepened. His face softened before adding, “Ally, if I don’t have you, my best friend in my corner, how can I expect my mother to come around? I need you to appreciate and respect my decision.”

“First, your mother and I want you to be happy and as I said, we don’t think Erica is *long term happiness* for you. The minute you decide to retire to the ranch for more than just holidays, she will be out of there. Erica can’t exist outside the city. Secondly, you don’t have anything to prove by making her the “one”.” She waved a long manicured finger at him.

“Alec, you have more money than you can spend in a lifetime and your reputation brings clients to you. You’re about to embark into your comfort years. Therefore, whom you choose to date or marry at this point, should be all about what’s in *your* heart. You don’t have to live up to those stereotypical expectations you picked up in high school.”

“What do you mean by that?” Alec glanced at Allison and held her stare. “I actually cared for the girls I dated in high school.”

“Hey, you’re really out of it today; because, it’s me you’re talkin’ to. I’ve known your life’s plan since you spoke your first word.” Allison rolled her eyes and threw her feet up on the desk, reclining comfortably in the chair. “You knew what you wanted to be, how many

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kids you were going to have, and the type of girl you were going to marry before we got out our diapers.”

“You’re always so exaggerative,” Alec chuckled. He thought to push her feet off his desk, but he knew it would be a waste of time, she’d put them back up there to aggravate him. Allison was like having a sister and brother rolled up into one.

“Hell, in the past few years I’ve hooked you up with half of the women you become involved with. You know, the shallow beauty queens, models, actresses, and socialites. All the types of women you thought the world needed you to be seen with. After all what self-respecting playboy will be seen with a woman over a size four? But, I know the type of girls you really like.”

Alec gave her a look that warned her to stop while she was ahead. Those days were over. In high school, he learned that certain guys with certain reputations to uphold are supposed to have a certain kind of girl on their arm. It was an inclination to your social standing and the girl on your arm was seen as a visual aid to how popular you were amongst your fellow classmates.

As a quarterback and senior class president, he dated the head cheerleader. When he went to college, the girl that wore his letterman jacket was homecoming queen. That’s just the way it’s always been. As a businessman the woman with the biggest breasts, and the longest legs got you slaps on the back and an opening for lucrative business deals. Why change things now?

“Ally--”

“I’m just saying, Alec, you don’t have to go with the flow anymore. If you’re attracted to Mary, don’t push it aside; explore it.” Allison put up her hand up to stop his protest.

“If you’re about to lie again, don’t. You’ve always liked the girls on the heavy side, that’s why you usually asked me to hook you up with assistances with the curviest butts and biggest fake boobs. It’s the nearest thing you can get to your attraction to voluptuous. But none of them have the plump all-over curves of a big girl.”

Alec dropped his chin to his chest and broodingly leaned back in his chair. He couldn’t argue against the truth so he didn’t even try. However, he could *try* to keep his hands off Mary, because it was best...for the both of them.

Indeed, she was sweet, kind, and too trusting and he was toxic when it came to matters of love. He didn’t even know if he could truly be a good husband and father, like his dad was. It was something he’s never done before. What if he was lousy at it like he had been in

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his relationships?

He didn't want to fall in love with Mary only to have her hating him in the end for placing business matters before her and what if he became bored like with the others? Look at how he left Erica hanging just last night. If he didn't recognize anything else with Mary, he realized she deserved someone as wholesome and giving as she seemed to be.

Alec's mind drifted to remembering the feel of Mary's lips on his and resisted the urge to touch his lips in front of Ally. He could tell by kissing her, she wasn't very skilled and the thoughts of being the one to teach her the art of kissing, touching, and anything else she may not have experience in, hardened his cock. *Damn, let it go Alec.*

"Al, why settle for Erica, of all people?"

"Ally, I chose Erica for marriage because she doesn't need me to love her. I just need to occasionally be by her side in public functions, and we can have an open marriage and the both of us can be discreet. You know, one hand scratches the other's needs." He shrugged. "Erica gets me. She's a female version of me, therefore, making us perfect for each other."

"I can't believe she greed to children." Ally shook her head.

"Child. We agreed to have, one child." Alec looked away from Allison's stunned gazed.

"What the hell? Alec, for as long as I've known you, you've wanted a big family. Your own "rowing team" is what I believed you said."

Alec chuckled. "That was the foolish ranting of a kid that had no clue what women went through having babies. Now, I know."

"Damn, Boy, what else are you willing to give up for this farce of a relationship with Erica? She's the one who wanted you to hire a less attractive assistant, now that doesn't sound like a woman prepared for an open marriage to me. Sounds like she's telling you one thing and planning another--" Allison paused and laughed. "Oh, this is going to be interesting."

Alec eyed her suspiciously. "What do you mean...interesting?"

"Well, I think once Erica gets a look at Ms. Mary Christmas she is going to think she has gotten her way, once more." Allison eyes crinkled in mirth.

"Ally, what's your point, I'm am giving Erica her way and I agree to her reasoning. I'm learning to change and adapt to someone else's needs," he reasoned.

"Bullshit! Erica doesn't know what we know."

His eyebrows lifted and he cocked his head to the side in question. "Which is?"

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“Mary is exactly your...type of woman.” She shook her head before he could protest and added, “No, not the type to end up as a one night conquest in your bed, but the type of woman that will capture your heart, when you least expect it.”

“Speaking of bullshit,” Alec groaned and stretched his arms over his head stifling a yawn. There was no reasoning with Allison once she made up her mind about something. Besides why should he argue the point? Once he married Erica, it would put all these foolish talks with Allison and his mother to rest.

The thing that Allison said that left him concerned was, she was right, Mary was exactly the type of girl he crushed on in high school, but he didn’t listen to his heart when he was younger, so why make things more complicated by allowing it to interfere now?

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CHAPTER FIVE

Mary sat gazing out the window, her mind a jumble of thoughts about nothing in particular. She just needed a distraction from the man that sat close to her in the confines of the SUV as it made twists and turns up the mountain road.

Every now and then, while he concentrated on the road she stole glances at his handsome profile. His thick dark hair wasn't comb into any particular style today and it fit well with the casualness of his black turtleneck sweater and blue jeans. She never seen him dressed this way before and it was nice. It made him seem more approachable, unlike the playboy workaholic the tabloids make him out to be.

Mary closed her eyes in took in the masculine smell of Alec's spicy, woodsy aftershave. She knew the smell *Drakkar Noir*, because it was her favorite. Since she didn't anticipate having a man in her life she purchased a small bottle of the cologne to spray a little on her body pillow and cuddled against it every night. There were times she would cry and wished the pillow were a man that loved her and held her back.

Already she felt it was going to be the best Christmas of her life. Now all she needed was to tie a decorative bow around Alec's slender naked hips and have him waiting under the tree on Christmas morning. Then again, getting Alec as a Christmas gift was whimsical on her part. It would never happen. Just because he kissed her once, out of curiosity, it didn't mean he actually felt something for her.

"You're quiet." Alec was the first to break the silence. "I hope you're not too disappointed about your parents not being able to join us today. Didn't you say if your father is better by next week, they would drive up?"

Mary nodded. "It worries me when my parents gets a cold, because of their age, a simple cold can easily turn into pneumonia. I believe the older they get, the more I worry about them."

"That's understandable," he smiled reaching over to squeeze her hand resting on the armrest between them.

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She glanced down at his pale hand over hers and wondered if he had any idea of how much he seemed to touch her throughout their time together. She wasn't use to being touched so much, but she wasn't complaining, she liked it, probably more than she should.

"I know I made it seem like you didn't have a choice but to come to the cabin with me for the holidays, but I wouldn't have fired you if you'd told me you didn't want to come. Don't get me wrong; I really need your help. Still, you made it clear how important it is for you to spend Christmas with your parents."

"It is, and I still hope they can join us next week," Mary said softly.

"Well, how about this? If your parents aren't able to make it up here come the day before Christmas Eve, I'll take you back home and can come back to get you the day after Christmas," he offered.

Mary's eyes locked shortly with his he turned his attention back to the road. "Wouldn't that be a lot of trouble?

"Of course not. I'm not an ogre, you know." He teasingly winked at her.

Mary felt her cheeks warming. "I didn't think you were. An occasional ass maybe, but you're too handsome to be an ogre."

Alec's mouth spread into a wide grin. "You think I'm handsome?"

"Why am I not surprised that you ignored my insult and accepted the compliment?" Mary rolled her eyes at him and clicked her tongue.

"I guess it's because I know I'm an ass, but I hardly get called "handsome."

Mary couldn't hide the skeptical look that came to her face. "Oh please! You're called handsome in the media all the time."

"That doesn't count; they don't know me and it doesn't matter what they think. It pleases me that you find me handsome.

"You're serious?" Her face was unmasked surprise. "Why?"

"Because if you find me handsome, half the job of getting you to fall head over hills is already done."

Mary looked at him, her breath caught in the back of her throat. She spotted the teasing crinkles around his mouth before he finally gave into the need to laugh.

She should have known he was just joking. Mary chuckled playing off her embarrassment and said, "I take it back, I don't think you're handsome after all."

"Too late, because now I know and you can't take it back." Alec stated his eyes focused on the road. "If it makes you feel better I think you're pretty."

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Blushing profusely and trying not to grin like an idiot, she returned her attention towards the view outside the passenger window. "I thought the weather said no snow accumulations today. From the looks of it, it's not going to stop anytime soon and it's sticking."

"It's not unusual," he replied, clearing his throat. "It's a dry snow, so we shouldn't have any visual problems and I have my snow chains if needed."

Mary moaned. "What'll happen if no one else can make it up to the cabin next week or we can't leave to go to my parents?"

"Then I guess it's just, you and me kid."

"That has to be the worse, Humphrey Bogart, imitation I've every heard." Mary shook her head. "Are you ever serious about anything?"

His eyebrows arched in surprise. "I'm usually accused of being too serious, about everything, except relationships, of course."

"You know, I've heard that rumor too, but I have yet to see it." She grinned.

He grunted. "I guess you bring out the kid in me, Ms. Mary Christmas."

"The jury is still out deciding if that's a good thing or not." Mary said enjoying the ease that transpired between them whenever they were alone.

"Since you brought it up, would it bother you if we found ourselves snowed in and cut off from the rest of the world for a few days?" he asked

Mary didn't have the nerve to look at him, not now when she was feeling so exposed. A part of her wanted to shout she would love to be with him no matter where they were or the circumstances, but it wasn't feasible to say such things to her employer.

Alec was just a flirt and she wasn't stupid enough to take anything he said seriously when it came to his whimsy teasing.

"I checked the weather report before we left and the last big snow storm they had up here was three years ago. So, we probably have no worries. You won't get stuck with just me for the holidays and I'm sure you'll get to make your engagement official as planned." Mary forced a lighthearted smile. Mary thought of Alec marrying and it bothered her, she had no right to feel agitated, but she was.

"You're probably right," he replied without tone. "I'm sure being stuck out here with me for Christmas would be a fate worse than death since you probably think of me as Ebenezer Scrooge."

Mary started to protest and decided it was best to allow him to believe what he wanted to believe. If she allowed him to continue thinking she thought the worse of him, the easier it

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would be to keep things strictly business between them.

“I didn’t see a wedding date scheduled on your calendar yet.” She looked at him out of the corner of her eyes. His hands tightened on the steering wheel of the vehicle. “The reason I bring it up is because, I saw your schedule was pretty full for next six months. I figure you would like to have at least 2 to 3 weeks for the wedding and the honeymoon.”

“We haven’t even discussed a date yet,” Alec said in a low composed voice. “No need to worry at the moment. I’m sure I can make all the necessary changes if the need arises.”

“If?”

“Er...*when*, we make a firm decision.”

He gave her a smile that sent her pulse racing. She found it impossible not to return his disarming smile.

Mary craned her neck to take it all in as Alec turn off the main road leading towards an overlook that housed the Mercer holiday home. The rambling log house laired on the edge of an overlook opened to an impressive view of the mountain backdrop and the quaint town below.

The windshield wipers swished back and forwardly as Alec turned up the speed. The snow was coming down heavier; huge flakes covering the ground around them. He circled a large frozen-over fountain centerpiece in a cobbled courtyard and rolled to a stop in front of the house. Already Mary could imagine how beautiful it would be once it was decorated for Christmas; she couldn’t wait to get a look inside.

“Do you like it?” Alec asked as he shifted the gear into park, leaving the vehicle idling to keep the warmth of the heat going in the car.

“Oh, Alec, what’s not to like? It’s wonderful,” she spoke eagerly. Do you and your family decorate the outside for Christmas?”

“Of course,” he answered indulgently. “I have caretakers that stay on the property all year around and they will help me string up the lights and put up the garland.”

Her eyes twinkled as she turned towards him. “Alec, I want to help decorate, is that okay?”

“I was counting on you helping me get this place in order before the others get here. How about you have your way inside, treat it like it was your own home.” A wide grin thinned his lips. “The fellas and I will concentrate on the outside.”

Surprised, Mary beamed at the vote of confidence he had in her. He was allowing her free rein of his family home and for some reason it warmed her heart, but she didn’t want his

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family or fiancée to get the wrong idea.

“What if once your family arrive, they don’t like what I’ve done to the place?”

“You worry too much, Mary. My parents are the most laid back two people you will ever meet and they’ll appreciate anything you do, and most of all they will like you.” He assured her.

“How can you be so sure?”

“I’m sure, because *I* like you and most of the time my parents respect my instincts,” Alec explained

“Most of the time?” Her brow puckered in curiosity.

“I guess you might as well know since you’re going to be in the midst of it all.” Alec released his seatbelt and turned to stare at her, his arm resting on the steering wheel. “My mother is against my proposing to Erica and things get a little tense when those two are together.”

“This is the same mother that is laid back and you told me I have nothing to worry about?”

His mouth curved into an unconscious smile. “I believe you and my mom will get along swell because...” his voice drifted as if he wasn’t sure if he should finish.

“Because?” Mary encouraged him to continue.

Alec shrugged. “I don’t know, don’t take this the wrong way, but there is a warmth...a tender way about you that reminds me of my mother. I think that’s why I feel so comfortable around you and I feel as if I can share anything with you.”

Mary released a long inward groan. This was great. It was what every woman wanted from a man she was attracted to—to be seen in the same light as *his mother—not!*

Instead of speaking what she was thinking, she said, “Well, that’s great. I’m sure we will get along. Hey, we can even exchange recipes!”

His mouth twisted wryly. “You did take it the wrong way.”

“No problem. I assure you every woman my age, longs to be seen as a man’s mother.” Mary said smoothly with no expression on her face.

She gasped as his hand darted out and clasped her chin in his long fingers.

“Look into my eyes, Mary.” He ordered.

She did as she was told and the double meaning of his look was very obvious. Something intense flared through his entrancement. The tingling in the pit of her stomach increased. His stare traveled over her face, and searched her eyes.

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Mary had to fight her overwhelming need to be close to him. She remembered what it felt like to be crushed within his embrace. If he wanted to take her right now in this car she was powerless to resist, because her curiosity was aroused and he had stoked the gently growing fire that was simmering deep inside her.

His stare became as soft as a caress.

“Do you think I look at my mother this way?”

The sound of his deep voice affected her deeply. She could actually feel the muscles of her vagina clenching and heated moisture spreading in her growing state of arousal. Her large nipples harden against the cups of her bra. If he were to move his hand down and stroke a thumb across one of them, she would surely come from just his touch.

Mary licked her lips nervously. “I surely hope not,” she answered his question.

Alec leaned towards her and she lifted her face towards his. They were so close she felt the heat of his breath. He stopped. She kept her features deceptively composed. For an instant wistfulness stole into his expression and it was replaced with an inexplicable look of withdrawal. He released her face and drew back.

“May...maybe, we should be getting inside,” he murmured. “Stay put until I come over there. The cobblestone may be slippery.”

Disappointed she turned away, masking the heat of embarrassment that spread across her face. “Alec, I’m sorry. I really am looking forward to helping to get your home ready for Christmas. I didn’t mean to sound ungrateful. I know I’m here to work on the documents, but it’s nice of you to give me the opportunity to still do the things I would be doing if I were home with my family.”

“I’m the one who is sorry. What I did was out of line, yet again.” He released a long frustrated sigh. “I’m very grateful, Mary, even if I’m an ass about showing it. Agreeing to work is all that I have the right to ask of you. Please, if you wish to decorate, feel free to do so.”

“Alec--”

“I’ll have the caretakers get the Christmas stuff down from the attic and you can go through it and use what you want. Just know, that I will understand if you would rather spend your free time partying with the townspeople and making this a semi-vacation too.”

“Alec, it was I that asked to help with decorating the house for the holidays, so trust me I don’t feel as if I’m doing you any big favor here. Besides, I look forward to the distraction; that way, I won’t spend the entire time worrying if my father’s cold has worsened.”

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He turned to look at her and despite his closed expression she sensed his vulnerability.

“Thank you,” he said softly. “I want to say it now just in case I forget to do so later.”

“You’re welcome.” She was unable to tear her eyes from his face. She gave him a warm smile before asking, “Before we go in and get started is there anything or room that is off limits?”

“Nope, I meant it when I said think of it as your home for the next few weeks. The only thing that we can’t do is, decorate the tree, once it’s delivered.” Alec returned her smile, his demeanor relaxing once again. “A day or two before everyone is set to start arriving we have a standing order for a live pine tree to be delivered and once everyone arrives, we decorate it as a family.”

Mary studied his profile and smiled as he continued to speak about his family.

“We’ll belt out some Christmas tunes, while my Aunt Lucille plays the piano. Mother, will serve her infamous homemade hot apple cider. Be forewarned, that stuff packs a sneaky punch, so go light and don’t let my Uncle Arthur, convince you there is hardly any brandy in it, because he is can drink all night and not be phased.”

“It sounds wonderful.” Mary laughed. “It seems our families have more in common then I imagined.”

“I’m sure we will find we have more in common, then not, Mary.”

“Do you have heirloom ornaments?”

“Several, some going as far back as the seventeen hundreds. They’ve been pass down from my mother’s mother, and so on,” he answered.

Envy and sadness came over Mary.

Alec noticed and commented. “What gives? Did I say something wrong?”

“No, of course not, it’s just...”

“What?”

“I always envied those that could pass on their items so that their children and generations could have an idea of where they came from. Unfortunately for my family, and many other African American families we don’t have those historical treasures. I mean, we do, but a majority of us don’t, or it may go back as far as late eighteen or early nineteen hundreds.”

Alec pursed his lips in silent understanding.

“It’s hard enough for us to trace our family tree because of lack of records and files kept on slaves after they were sold. Even if you find out what happened to them, the trail can

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grow cold if the new owner wasn't as diligent in his record keeping or if they were freed then it seems to lead to...nothing."

"Truthfully, I never really thought much about what those old ornaments represented to my mother, I notice she cherishes them. After hearing how you feel I'm going to really look at the heirlooms."

"Don't just look at them Alec, while you still have your mother around, ask her if she knows the story behind the ornaments. Not all of them may have a tale, but I'm sure there is a Christmas past memory in there somewhere." Mary spoke with a quiet firmness.

"It would be something worth knowing to pass on to my children someday," Alec reasoned. "I know for some African American, their past are very vague, but there are a few Caucasian families that understands how you feel. It was only fortunate for us that our ancestors managed to salvage most of the things we have today especially something so delicate as those Christmas ornaments, during the migration from Europe to America. A lot of the families items were stolen, broken or sold during lean war times."

"True. Still, you have all this knowledge of your history. I don't even know if we ever had anything precious to lose during war times. For my ancestors, it probably felt as if it was always lean times." She explained. "My Granny's gone now, but I remember her telling me many stories of her childhood and her parents childhood. Things were very hard on them, but no matter what, they kept the family together and they always had food on the table."

Mary's eyes watered as she struggled with the recurring feelings of grief that comes around the holidays when she realized some loved ones were going to be forever missing. Even though it has been a couple of years since her mother's mother died, it still pained her terribly.

"Mary, I hate to see you upset, it makes me want to--" Alec paused.

"Want to what?" She chanced asking.

"It makes me want to take you in my arms and hold you," he confided. "However, I won't."

She bent her head to look at her hands clinched together in her lap. She didn't want to chance looking at him, not in her vulnerable state. "I understand." She nodded and continued to listen.

"You helped me the other night with my feelings over losing my brother. Losing a loved one is a pain that we all share, no matter what our race, history, or standing is in this world, it's a universal understanding." Alec released a long shuddering breath. "I don't believe my

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words are good enough to sooth you, I'm sorry."

"That's not it." Mary sniffled while wiping away a tear from her cheek. "Alec, I know I shouldn't be thinking this, but I like how it feels when you hold me. It's practically all I've thought about since you kissed me. Still--"

"You don't have to say it, Mary. I know what I did was inappropriate." His dark head dropped low. "I can't apologize for doing it, but I can promise that I will try to not overstep the boundaries again."

She couldn't resist looking at him and wish she hadn't as their eyes caressed, kissed and clung to one another in ways they dare not mimic.

"Come on, it looks like the snow has lightened up a bit. Let's go inside, while the getting is good." Alec suggested.

Mary sat in silence and waited for Alec as he made his way to the passenger-side and opened her door. Quietly she eased her hand in his and thanked him as he helped her step down. As soon as her booted feet hit the ground, she felt them give from beneath her. Mary released a squeal of alarm as her arms flailed to maintain her stance as his hands shout out to catch her falling forward against his strong awaiting frame. He didn't even stumble backward as she hit against him.

She held on to his suede and lambs wool coat while he held her in his arms. Nervous laughter bubbled from the both of them as they looked at each other.

"Are you okay?"

"No." Mary smiled and sniffled. The thin mountain air made breathing difficult causing her nose to run. She must look a mess, but there was no help for it or the fact that the damp snow was causing her hair to frizz, at least she had been smart enough to pull it up in a ponytail. "I'm scared that I'm going to bust my butt if I try to move. If I knew the weather was going to get crazy I would have worn different shoes."

"Just stand here a moment longer and get your bearings. I will help you up the steps and come back and get the bags out of the car." His hold tightened and he shivered, she didn't know if it was because of the cold or if he was feeling the same sweet intensity she was feeling while being in his arms.

"Thank you, I don't want to break something and be completely useless to help out around here." She shook her head in embarrassment. "I think I'm ready now if you want to try and make it to the door."

As if she hadn't spoken, he grinned down at her, his voice sounded tight as he spoke. "It

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seems as if we always end up in this position lately.”

She managed a laugh. “I guess if you hadn’t been curious about my lips and I wasn’t clumsy it wouldn’t happen at all.”

“I suppose I ought to loosen my hold on you and help you inside the house,” he murmured, but made no move towards the door, instead he held her even tighter against his body, his chin resting in the damp softness of her hair.

She tightened her hold around his waist. “Alec, do you realize how crazy this is? We barely even know each other,” she sighed, allowing herself to soak up his warmth. Mary leaned into his embrace; the reasons for them not to be touching like this seemed lost in the moment.

“I feel as if I do know you,” he said. “Holding you like this feels right to me.”

“Alec, you’re about to be engaged to another woman, for God’s sake. You may be accustomed to casual affairs of the heart, but I’m not.” Mary snapped and eased back in his loosened hold, yet he didn’t let her go.

“I don’t know what to tell you, sweetheart.” Alec shrugged. “I’m not going to lie to you. Yes, I’ve had my share of one-night-stands and casual affairs, but my heart has never come into play before. So these feelings I have for you are unsettling and confusing.”

“How can you be saying these things to me Alec, when this weekend you plan on proposing to the woman you love? It’s not fair for you to do this to me,” she said with easy defiance.

“Mary, I don’t love Erica and she doesn’t love me. We have more of an agreement. We fit each other’s current lifestyle,” he admitted honestly. “Lately, I’ve been questioning what I think I need and what will make me happy. It’s confusing, to say the least.”

“Well, if you consider Erica fitting, then where do I *fit* in? If she is anything like your usual choices of women, then I think that gives me my answer,” Mary said bitterly.

“Mary--” Alec’s face showed his irritation.

“You know what,” Mary interrupted. “This confusion you’re going through I don’t want to be a part of it. I won’t be your temporary distraction while you get your shit together,” Mary protested. She tried to push his hands aside and he didn’t let her budge.

Nose to nose with her, his face crumpled into a sudden grin. “Ms. Mary Christmas, cursing? Am I becoming a bad influence on you?”

“Alec, this isn’t funny.”

“I know...you’re right. Nevertheless, since we’re standing this close and I’m freezing

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my ass off, wouldn't you like to at least throw your hat in the ring and kiss me to help sway my decision?"

"What is this a joke?" Mary squealed. "I know that look, Alec Mercer! Don't even think about kissing me again."

With both hands, he clasped her face, then leaned forward and kissed her. This time, his kiss was even deeper, more intimate than the first time, as if he was trying to convince her he would be worth fighting for. Why should she?

While his mouth hungrily slipped against and nibbled on hers, she felt like he'd already made up his mind to choose her. Maybe, it could be wishful thinking on her part.

Desire burned within her, hot and steady, making her feel as if she was spiraling out of control, her cold fingers gripped his coat into her fist. Alec was hard in all the right places, his body carved to fit her in spite of their height and weight differences.

She opened her mouth, giving his tongue access to tango with hers. In response, she received a chesty moan. Her lips started out cold from the outside temperature but they were warm and pliable now beneath his heat.

Mary realized she was getting the hang of this kissing and Alec was an excellent teacher. She matched his movement, giving as well as she got. The one thing she realized was it wasn't enough. She wanted more, but not just Alec as her lover; she wanted everything that came with it. She deserved to be more than the "other woman". If he didn't know what he wanted, she didn't want to waste her hope and dreams on him.

Mary broke the kiss, managing to put her hands up between them, breaking the kiss. She noticed it took him a moment longer to realize she was no longer returning his kiss.

"Stop this, Alec."

"Mary..." He backed up, dropping his hands to his side. "I didn't mean to get carried away."

She made eye contact with him. "I want you. So much in fact, that I was willing to lay down here on this cold ass ground and let you make love to me, if you wanted. However, I can't because, you don't *love me*, Alec."

"I admitted I wasn't sure about what I was feeling. I don't think I ever been in love, Mary, not really. But I do know I have feelings for you that I wish to explore. Honey, I've never felt this way before." He took her cold hands in his, rubbing them between his to warm them.

"If I was more experienced in these things I would say let's go in the house and stay in

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bed until we figure out,” Mary gave him a half smile. “But I’m not that type of girl, when I make love it will be because I plan on spending the rest of my life with that man. We are like night and day when it comes to sexuality.”

“Your idea of staying in bed until we figure it out sounds promising to me,” he said gesturing toward the house. “The caretakers have warmed the house in anticipation of our arrival. There is fresh sheets on all the beds, we can bless all six bedrooms.” He caressed her cheek.

Mary chuckled and shook her head slowly. “Alec, I’m still a virgin and I haven’t stayed one this long to give it away on the possibility that you may be in love with me and just not realize it yet.”

“Fuck! I really feel like a leech now.” Alec looked up at the sky and closed his eyes briefly before opening them to stare at her. “Why didn’t you say something? I didn’t think virginity for women in our age bracket these days were even a possibility.” Alec placed some distance between them.

Mary sighed; she had seen this reaction time and time again once they found out where she stood. Why would she think Alec was different from the other men that she had developed attractions for?

Alec was after all, a well-publicized louse, when it came to women. There was no way she could entice him into a marriage with infidelity being a given, when women more beautiful and more experienced haven’t been able to convince him. He couldn’t even be loyal to the woman he had planned to ask to marry him, or he wouldn’t have been standing here kissing her that way.

“Thank you for telling me, because I would never have know after that hot kiss you just gave me.” Alec voice was dangerously low.

“That’s because I’m not stupid,” she said defensively. “I kissed you back the way you were kissing me.”

“Mary, I’m only a man and at this time, I’m a man that wants to make love with you desperately, but yes, this changes everything. I don’t want the responsibility of taking your virginity. That is something I couldn’t give back to you, if it turned out we weren’t compatible.”

Mary sighed and lifted her chin in a stubborn stance. “Of course not, when it comes to love, I don’t believe you have it in you to be responsible of another’s feelings. It’s all about your physical needs.”

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She saw him flinch but didn't care. She would be lying if she denied she felt hurt by his statement. "This bring us to one conclusion."

Alec's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Which is?"

"That I don't think working together would be a good idea." Mary looked him in the eyes and said, "Tomorrow, I will be returning home, you can either take me or point me towards an airport, bus, or train. I can't work for you. I don't want whatever this is between us to continue to grow until we do something or say something we can't take back."

"So, I don't get a choice in the matter?" Alec's voice was barely above a controlled whisper.

"You just did and you couldn't accept the responsibility, remember?" She lifted her chin meeting his icy gaze straight on.

"I will call Ally, and tell her to get back on the hunt to find me a temporary, that is until I can permanently fill the position. As for you returning home, I brought you here, and I will personally see to it that you safely return home."

"Thank you," Mary said in a clipped voice. Without further assistance, she made her way to the door and waited for him to join her. The tension between them remained heavy in the air. It took everything she had to give the pretend impression of total indifference. Regardless of her brave speech, she wanted Alec to be her first and only lover, but having only his desire would never be enough for her. Mary wanted to know the love she seen between her parents and grandparents or nothing at all.

Now she had to make it through the night then she could put Alec Mercer behind her for good; or so she told herself. Believing she would be able to forget the brief moments they had shared was another matter completely.

CHAPTER SIX

Alec stepped out of his bedroom, freshly showered and changed, to the smell of food. He made his way to the kitchen; his bedroom suite was located downstairs, so he only had to walk to the center of the spacious household to reach the large kitchen.

Stopping in the open doorway he was surprised to find Mary, changed into blue jeans and a tie-die kimono blouse, moving about the kitchen. Her dark brown hair appeared damp, and she seemed to regain some semblance of control over the soft adorable frizzy mess it had been when they first arrived.

The current hairstyle Mary wore, he believed Ally called it French braiding. When his best friend's hair was longer in high school, she would braid her hair before every basketball game swearing to some day cut it off. The day Allison sheered her hair they were in their junior year of college and finally she told her parents she was gay.

Mary looked absolutely at home in his kitchen. His eyes took in the deep curve of her back that swelled into generously proportioned hips and bottom. The thickness of her thighs tensed as she stood on her tiptoes to remove some spices from the upper cabinet over the range.

Alec felt his cock harden and he stifled a moan, wondering how stupid could he be thinking he had asked Mary to work for him because she was frumpy and undesirable. She was wearing the hell out of those jeans. *Damn.*

Ally was right about Mary. She had all the requirements of his dream girl or at least his requirements since he first started noticing girls in a sexual way. Regardless of fooling himself into believing he was no longer attracted to big women, he realized the truth, he like his women, big, cuddly, and soft.

After taking a shower and thinking about the conversation that had transpired between them earlier, he realized he might have made a grave mistake. In a way, this was no different than what he'd always done. When it came to women, he never made good choices. Alec dated to impress and for once, here stood a woman that asked...no, demanded more of him.

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His desire for Mary was personal. He knew in his heart she not only looked good to him, she would feel good. She made him feel good; too good, as a matter-of-fact.

The question now is what was he going to do about it after he insulted her for being a virgin. That had to be the stupidest thing he'd ever done to date. What man wouldn't feel pride in being a woman's first? Still, if nothing else he had to be sure because of that same reason.

What he needed to figure out is if he should listen to what his heart wanted or if he should continue to worry about what others thought about him and marry a woman more acceptable to his standing in his social circle, like Erica. Did he really need the hassles of an interracial relationship?

Alec swallowed back the bitter bile in the back of his throat; it made him sick to think he had become the type of man that would even be thinking such racist thoughts. When did he start to give a fuck about what others thought? His parents didn't raise him to think this way. Was Ally right? Had it all started way back in his early school years?

Mary made it clear she was attracted to him, but in the end could she fall in love with a man that has spent his entire life being shallow and insincere to women? The more Alec's thoughts lingered on his faults the more he was beginning to feel like he didn't deserve someone as sweet and sincere as the woman standing before him. He had his own Virgin Mary with the last name, Christmas. She truly was a gift.

Silently with a contented smile on his lips, Alec continued to appreciate the domestic scene unfolding before him. For the briefest of moments, his mind flashed to a high chair pushed up to kitchen table with Mary feeding a cherub-faced infant that was a combination of him and her. He shook his head. The emotions this picture brought forth were overpowering and he realized it was something he was ready for.

Alec released an inward curse. Why hadn't he taken some time to evaluate his feelings before he shot off his mouth to Mary earlier? She basically told him she was interested yet hesitant. What did he do? Did he reciprocate her interest? No! He stupidly told her that he wasn't interested in a virgin, when inside he was thrilled at the thought of becoming her first and only lover. Why didn't he tell her that, instead?

"Tell me, Alec Mercer, do you like what you see? You've been standing there quietly watching me for some time."

Alec face reddened. He'd been caught.

"Huh? I...I was looking at that delicious steak you're frying up in the skillet," he

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feigned.

“I hope it’s okay this way for you. I prefer it cooked this way in butter instead of broiling in the oven.”

“I’m easy when it comes to food; but Mary, I don’t expect you to cook for us. I could have called down to the bunker house and had the chef to fix something.”

“If the “chef” is George, he came by and offered and I asked if it was okay for me to use the kitchen. He was very nice and showed me around,” she explained. “I love cooking it relaxes me.”

Alec moved further into the kitchen and leaned his butt against the edge of the gray marbled countertop watching her as she checked a couple of huge potatoes wrapped in aluminum foil and baking in the oven.

“Is your room okay?”

“It’s cozy and perfect, thank you.” Mary stated moving away from him. He watched her walk over to the refrigerator. She removed a large glass bowl of what appeared to be mixed lettuce and tomatoes and returned to stand in front of him.

Mary thrust the salad bowl against his abdomen. “Make yourself useful and put this on the table, please, and while you’re there you might as well set the table.”

Without commenting he made his way to the kitchen table.

He was Alec Mercer, and very seldom did anyone order him about, other than his parents. They were proud of his accomplishments but not overly impressed by anything he did. He saw his father more excited when he hit a homerun in little league, then when he got the award for “Business Man of The Year”. Yet here was this woman ordering him about his own kitchen and it foolishly made him feel warm and domesticated. He wondered if this is what marriage is like?

“Hey Alec? Are you okay?”

He and Mary exchanged glances.

He grunted. “No, I’m fine, but I wanted to speak to you about something that I’ve been thinking about since we spoke earlier.”

“All right. Why don’t you get us something to drink and I will fix our plates.”

“I could use a beer. I know you don’t like the taste of alcohol; do you want a soft drink of some kind? We got a little bit of everything.”

“I saw a pitcher of lemonade in the fridge, how about that?”

“No problem.”

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Alec took his seat across from Mary. His savory meal consisting of steak, salad, bake potato, and two slices of garlic bread rested before him. He wondered if he should speak now, or wait until after dinner.

"Thank you, Mary. Everything looks and smells delicious." He sliced and forked a piece of well-seasoned sirloin steak in his mouth. From that point on another word didn't leave his lips.

They ate in companionable silence. Alec cleaned his place with the third piece of garlic bread Mary gave him from her plate with a lifted eyebrow. He was embarrassed that he was being greedy, but he accepted it and sopped up the last of the buttery juices left on his plate from the steak.

"I won't even have to put that plate in the dishwasher," Mary laughed. "Would you like me to fry you up another one, big boy?"

Alec grinned from ear to ear leaning back in his seat with a loud contented groan he rubbed his stomach and released a rude belch, covering his mouth. "Oops, sorry, but that burp was a compliment to the cook. I don't think I've met a woman other than my mother that has cooked me such a satisfying meal. When he stood he asked, "I'm getting another beer, would you like a refill on the lemonade?"

"Yes, thank you."

Upon his return, he could see Mary had finished her meal from the crumpled paper napkin in her plate, but she hadn't cleaned her plate. "You looked like you barely touched your meal. Are you feeling okay?"

"Yeah, I guess I wasn't as hungry as I thought I was."

Alec handed her the glass and suggested, "Why don't you bring your lemonade and we can go and sit by the fireplace and talk."

"Okay, but what about the dishes?" She pushed back and stood.

"I will put them in the dishwasher before I turn in for the night."

He noticed her skeptical look.

"Hey, I'm not helpless, I use to bust my tail as a griller and dishwasher to pay for my school books." He took a hefty swig of his beer.

"Really? That's something I can say I hadn't read about you?"

"I think that's our problem, Ms. Mary Christmas. You have these crazy ideas based on my very public persona, but I would like us to get to know one another." He grinned. "What do you say? That's what I want to speak with you about. I want to ask you can we start over?"

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Not as employer and employee, but as a man and woman trying to get to know more about each other.”

Mary cocked her head to the side as if she was surprised to hear him make the request, which he couldn't blame her. In a matter of a few hours he'd did a complete one-eighty in his thinking.

Mary gave him a closed lips smile and said, “Lead the way; there is a fireplace in every room, so I have no idea, where you want to go. This place is cozy with all this beautiful pine wood walls and flooring, but it's huge.”

“You'll get use to it,” he assured.

“Not in one day, I won't,” she murmured. “After tomorrow it won't matter, I will be out of your life...forever.”

Alec cringed at her words, it seemed so final and left him without much hope of changing her mind, but he didn't get where he was by giving up so easily. He wanted to be with Mary, no one else, but her. Whether she accept him or not, he knew one thing for sure, he couldn't ask Erica to marry him.

Silently he prayed that the predicted overnight snow showers would arrive in time to force Mary to stay with him regardless of how this conversation proceeded.

Still, just in case he couldn't depend on the weather, he must convince her to give him at least one week. If at the end of the week she still didn't feel he was sincere or could be trusted, he would get her back home before his family and friends were set to arrive.

No one would be the wiser and save her from any media speculations about who she is and why he was being seen around town with her. This too was another aspect of his life that he wondered if Mary would be able to accept. Not everyone could adapt to living in the limelight.

In the media family room, he motioned with beer bottle in hand for Mary to sit on the brown soft leather sofa. With the push of a button the gas fireplace sparked and flared. Alec dropped down next to her, leaving enough space between them to be comfortable.

He placed his half-full beer bottle down on the decorative wooden tray that rested in the center of the zebra print foot-table. Picking up a remote Kenny G playing renditions of Christmas songs filtered out of the hidden stereo speakers. He put the remote down.

“Comfortable?” He shifted and tugged at his jeans, the crotch feeling tighter by the minute. The more time he spent with her the more he found her beautiful, glasses and all. Especially now as the soft light in the room cast a golden glow over her brown skin.

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"Yes, but you don't seem to be." Mary commented. "I can tell something has been on your mind, even through dinner you were very quiet. Are you fearful that I won't be able to get out of your hair come morning because of the weather? Would it be that bad if you had to spend a few days alone with me?"

He was amazed that she seemed to be able to read him so well, but she was wrong he was more fearful that he wouldn't have any more time with her.

Alec turned to the side with one knee crooked on the sofa. He eased his arm along the back of the sofa behind her, leaning forward slightly, invading her space as much as he dared. He didn't want to move too fast, nor did he want her to think he was putting some typical jet-setting playboy moves on her.

"I have thought about nothing else since our conversation and-- "

Mary shook her head and said, "Look, Alec, I know it has to be annoying to have me under the same roof as you are. I know my reaction to your advances were childish, considering you're use to more experienced women in these matters. Trust me, now that I know my being a virgin is not to your liking, I won't make any more heartfelt confessions. I got the message and I understand, some men aren't into virgins, black women, or big women and I got all of these going for me."

"That's not it at all. I've been thinking about it...us. Mary, since I kissed you again earlier, I have relived the moment. It felt right, you felt right in my arms and something tells me if I don't explore these feelings I have for you I will regret it for the rest of my life."

"Alec," she whispered his name and licked her lips.

He had the driven urge to kiss her again, but refrained, not sure if it would be welcomed.

"Alec," she repeated. "What exactly are you saying, exactly?"

"I want you to stay, Mary," he uttered and held his breath waiting for her to shoot all his hopes to hell. It was what he deserved, after telling her because she was a virgin, he wasn't interested.

Mary went still. "What's changed in the matter of a few hours? I haven't. I'm the same woman, you spoke to earlier; nothing, has changed for me."

"Nothing? Not even the attraction you have for me?" His eyes lit up with hope.

She looked him in the eyes. "Nothing."

"Well, something has changed for me," Alec admitted with a shrugged. "I've grown wiser. I realized I've been blessed with this wonderful gift, even though you've been under my nose all this time at the office, I was so blinded by what I thought I wanted, that I didn't

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know what *I needed*, until that moment you told me you couldn't remain by my side."

He was grateful she remained quiet and serene in her appearance during his confession or he didn't know if he would have been able to continue. This was awkward for him. He never discussed "his feelings" with a woman before.

"Mary, I realized that if I you returned home before we could explore whatever is going on between us, I would always wonder what would have happened between us if we were to allow things to progress naturally. I don't want to place any pressure on you but I want you to give me another chance."

"Are you sure? You see I need more than a casual sexual affair, Alec." She said before shaking her head and saying more passionately, "Hell no, I *deserve* more. Sex is not only something that makes you feel good, it's a spiritual bonding that is sacred. I know this, and I choose not to abuse this beautiful gift from God, unless I know the man I give this gift to is in it for all the right reasons."

"I tell myself that it would be magnanimous of me to let you go, but that would mean that I was ignoring my feelings and it's time to face the truth. What I feel for you, Mary, it's not going to just go away because you are no longer here," he openly admitted.

"Whatever this is between us, it's growing stronger," she countered.

"Yes, it is." He reached out his hand caressing her the fullness of her cheek. "So, you do feel it too?"

"Yes, I admitted I felt something; but, Alec, what if you realize after I've fully vested my heart in you that I'm not what you're accustomed to, that I'm not enough of a challenge, or one day you wake up one day and really take a look at me without clothing--"

"Baby...baby...slow down." Alec cupped her face in his hands. "Do you truly think that low of me? Because if you do, then I'm truly going to have a time trying to convince you that I'm serious." He grinned. "Also isn't that a chance we all take when you try to build a relationship. Couldn't I ask you all of the same questions?"

She shrugged her round shoulders at him. "Still, it's not as if you've spent your adult life taking your relationships with women seriously or has everything I read in the news and around the office a lie? If you weren't sure just a couple hours that I was what you wanted, then how do I know that this isn't just another new game for you?"

"I won't lie and say I didn't give the gossipmongers something to talk about at time. By no means will you be getting a saint if you choose to give us a shot, but if you can't get past who you believe I am, or my past then there is no reason to have this conversation."

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"I'm so obviously not perfect, so I don't expect it of you, but I don't know if I can learn to trust you to the point of intimacy."

Alec dropped his hands from her face. He looked into the burning fireplace. "So you're telling me it's hopeless? I could never possibly change or seriously fall for a virtuous woman, such as yourself, so I must have a motive, right?"

"No, I didn't say that, I just need some time," Mary reasoned. "You took time, which by the way isn't a flattering feeling for any woman. Now I need you to give me some time."

"It's because of the comment I made about you being a virgin, isn't it?"

"Partly, but also because I have you at a disadvantage."

"Meaning?"

"Well your life is practically an open book, hell, you have a biography on the library shelves," she chuckled.

Alec's mouth crooked into a half smile. Chagrined he said, "I always thought people should do those about you when you died, that is if someone felt inclined. That was *unauthorized*, by the way and I've never read it."

"My point is, I know more about you than you know about me. There is a reason, I've waited so long to have sex and it's not all moralistic."

"Such as?"

"Such as I don't really wish to discuss it, right now."

"Okay, so you are asking for time." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I can do that, regardless of the fact that I'm very attracted to you. Also, my attraction does not mean I don't still need your help, at least for this week."

"You still really want me to stay?"

"Yes," he replied instantly. "So do you still want to stay?"

Alec really wanted her to say yes. He needed her to remain in order to change her mind about him. He never had much faith in that Christmas wishing stuff his mother spoke each Christmas season, but if what she said was true then his personal wish would come true and the weather would grow worse overnight.

"Alec, I don't know--"

"Mary," he interrupted. "I suppose I made a mistake by taking you as a woman of your word. Maybe I should have drawn up that contract before we left after all." His eyes chanced a glance at her and he could see she was fuming. He squelched a smile. She really was adorable. "I could have sworn you promised to come here and help me get those contracts

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in order before they are due to go out for the new fiscal year.”

“I can’t believe you would even go there. You would still hold me to my word?”

He shrugged haphazardly. “Nope, what do I care if you can’t be trusted to keep your word? I’m a businessman and I know how to not let my personal feelings get in the way of what needs to be done. It just proves to me that you are as unreliable as the rest of them, and maybe in your own unusual way had a motive for agreeing to come up here at all. I guess, all women say one thing, yet do another.”

“I dare you to lump me up in the same group with those other women, Alec,” she yelled at him and slapped his arm.

He risked another glance and she was doing the neck thing. Ally told him all about the neck thing when they were kids, but she was wrong about one thing; black women, weren’t the only ones that did this neck thing.

Alec dated all kinds of women and when they were pissed at him, they all did the head thing. The difference was, Italian women did it while waving their hands in his face, Black women put their hands on their hips, White women tucked their hair behind their ear, and Asian women crossed their arms over their breast.

Mentally, he laughed. Women amazed the hell out of him; all of them thought they were so much different or better than the other one, but not to a man. To a man, they all sounded the same when they were pissed. Only this time, he was falling in love with the one currently yelling at him.

“Alec, why are you grinning?”

“I’m grinning, because I find you utterly adorable,” he said seriously. “Mary, I would love to explore what’s happening between us. I understand that this is new for both of us and so far we don’t have any emotional investments, right?”

“If you say so,” was all she said.

What in hell did that mean, he wondered. Sighing, he continued. “Darling, if you don’t wish to go any further, then fine, I won’t push. We’re both adults and we can keep it professional from this moment.”

“Well, I know there is at least one adult between us.” She cut her eyes at him.

He should have been offended but he wasn’t. Alec laughed aloud.

Mary returned his smile and immediately he felt the tension between them ease. “So I suppose you’re saying you’ll finish out the week?”

“I did promise.”

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“Great and I will drive you home at the end of the week,” Alec conceded aloud, but deep inside he was hoping she would spend Christmas and New Years Eve with him. “You can call your parents and let them know you’ll be home just in case your father gets better and they chance coming up sooner”

“Yeah, I think that would be better. It would be kind of awkward with me and my parents being here once your fiancée and her family arrives, it’s such a personal time for all of you, it wouldn’t be right for us to be here.”

“There has been a change of plans. Erica and her family will not be joining us.” He stared at her as he spoke gauging her reaction.

“I don’t understand, did they call and cancel?”

Was that hope he heard in her voice? “No, I’m going to call Erica tonight and let her know that it’s best if she doesn’t come. It’s not going to work out for us, I realize that now.”

“Just like that?” Disbelief showed on Mary’s face. “Isn’t that a bit harsh? We’re talking about a woman you were going to ask to marry you. You’re going to drop her over the phone? Hey, how about I just fax her a memo for ya and save you the trouble?”

He merely stared, tongue-tied. She was actually upset with him. He thought she would be happy he wasn’t going to propose to Erica. She was an every-changing mystery to him.

“Mary, why are you so upset? I thought you would be happy!”

“What kind of woman would I be if I was happy at another woman’s unhappiness? Besides, since we aren’t even sure about what this is between us, I don’t want to be the cause of you giving up someone that you loved enough to ask to be your wife,” Mary explained spreading her hands wide. “This decision is too serious to not spend more time thinking about it.”

“Please don’t stress over this Mary. No matter what happens with you, I realized I want what you wanted. A marriage, like the one my parents have. I never really thought about the possibility of marrying for personal happiness. For so long I treated my entire life as a business transaction, even my personal life.”

He grasped her hand.

“The women in my life gave me their bodies and I made sure they wanted for nothing. They were contented with that. It too, was a form of business to fulfill both our basic needs. Erica, cares for all that I represent to her socialite lifestyle. The reason I chose to marry her is because she’s never pretended to love me and I didn’t need love in my marriage. I thought I needed an heir, and a wife that complimented my position in life. Erica offered to give me

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those things and she doesn't need my money. She just needed my discretion and acceptance of her swinging lifestyle, while she gave her father what he wanted before he cut off her trust fund."

Alec treasured the feel of her fingers as they intertwined with his own. Unconsciously, her thumb was caressing over his and he could have sworn there were blood veins going straight to his penis.

He released a shuddering sigh amazed by the things Mary did to his senses, by just her simple touches, and by being there. Even the way she looked at him gave him a feeling of warmth and most of all it gave him the ability to hope for things he never dared to before.

She touched his shoulder and softly said, "I had no idea that you were considering marrying for any other reason than the fact that you were in love with Erica."

Alec shook his head. "I thought love wasn't necessary because I had everything else I could want. I know with my parents, they always said it was their love that got them through the lean years when the four of us lived in a small two-bedroom home. I couldn't relate to that, because I'm fortunate to not have to know lean times. So I thought love was unnecessary."

"How could you have thought such a thing? Alec, it was also that love that got your parents through the death of losing your younger brother in Iraq. What good was money in helping to heal that pain?"

Alec never thought about it, but Mary was right. With all the money he had, he had felt useless to help his family through that great loss. He had thought using his money to open up a Veteran Memorial fund in his brother's name to help other families that came into financial hardships would help his family to heal.

He threw himself into working until he was exhausted to appease his guilt. It wasn't until his mother threw her foot down and yelled at him, something she rarely did. In her anger she told him she needed one thing and that was for him to stop using work as an excuse. They needed him, not things. She needed to know she had the love of the only child she had left. Alec hadn't realized it until Mary said something, but it was then the real healing began for his family.

"You're right, Mary. I thought money was the answer to all my problems. When I was younger, we didn't seem to have as much as other kids did. I didn't know then what I know now and that is, we had more than some of those kids. We had the attention of our parents."

Mary squeezed his hand and he found it comforting.

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“Boy, I use to envy my friends back then.” Alec shook his head. “I was taking the bus while all my friends had cars. They took summer vacations in the Hampton's while I spent it mowing yards and bagging groceries in the local stores. I always told myself one day I wasn't going to have to worry about being the sweaty kid looking into other people's window, wanting what they had.”

“I never felt that pressure personally because I went to a school where most of the kids were middle class or poor,” Mary voiced.

“I was in a private school. My parents worked overtime to keep me in there because they believed it would look better on my college entrance forms. They rarely saw each other. Mom would work days and Dad, nights. The only time we all got to sit at the table as a family was early mornings, and they spent most of the time discussing bills over breakfast. I wanted to take away all that stress from their shoulders. I made it my life's goal.”

“Look at you now, you've achieved comfort and so much more.” Mary touched his face for a moment. He found her touch reassuring. “Honey, don't you think it's time to reap the benefits and make happiness your new, life's goal?”

“That's exactly what I've been thinking about lately,” Alec admitted. “I also asked myself, if I were to lose everything I have would Erica stay by my side?”

“Would she?”

“Of course not.”

She nodded in agreement, but remained silent. She continued to hold and stroke his hand with her fingers. In some odd way, this simple comfort coming from her was enough to make him want to share things with her that he hadn't shared with Ally or his family.

Taking and releasing a deep breath, Alec looked into her eyes and said, “Mary, recently I have been considering making a major change professionally. I've been thinking about relinquishing my workload by taking on shareholders for my company and franchising my name to smaller companies. If I agree this will free me up to do what I love to do.”

“Isn't advertising what your first love?”

“No, that is what makes and keeps me rich.” He wiggled his eyebrows playfully.

She giggled. “Now, you got me curious. What is it you rather be doing?”

“Painting,” he confided his secret.

“Painting,” she repeated. “Like what houses, or something?”

Alec threw back his dark head and laughed. “No, silly woman, I'm a true artist at heart. I paint landscapes and portraits.”

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Mary's chin dropped in surprise. "You're serious. Damn, that is a rumor that hasn't managed to circulate around the office. Can I see something you've painted, or is this something you're just now getting in to doing?"

"No, I've been painting for years but under an anonymous name."

"Wow," she sighed. "Have I seen anything you've done unknowingly?"

"In the lobby of the Mercer Office building everyday you come to work, one of my pieces you can see as you enter the door."

Mary rolled her eyes at him through her glasses. "Oh, now I know you're messing with me. You almost had me believing you, Alec because I don't know many artists works, but I know that one belongs to *Marceau Rubenesque*. I know because I own one of his prints. You might have seen it hanging in my living room."

A thoughtful smiled curved his lips. "You really like my work?"

"Oh, please, you probably wish you could paint like that." She released his hand and reached for her glass of lemonade. He watched her take a drink and replaced the glass on the tray before she continued, "Now that brotha knows how to beautify the full-figured woman. I can tell he has a true appreciation for women like me, even if it is the less popular point of view commercially."

"I'm not lying to you, Mary. Also, I hope you know, that the hanging on your wall is a print of the one I called, "Harmony in Curves", not the original." Alec quirked a brow asking, "What I'm curious about is why you would assume Marceau Rubenesque is a, what did you call it, *brotha*?"

"I don't know." Mary shrugged at him pursing her luscious lips in thought. He had to bite down on his inner bottom lip to keep from dragging her in his arms and kissing her foolishly. "I assumed he was, because his style seemed somewhat urban, yet classical. You know what I mean? I'm surprised you purchase his artwork to showcase at the office. Besides me that portrait is the only other big woman in the Mercer building," she teased.

"Okay I deserve that one," Alec chuckled shaking his head. "I put everything I had into creating Mercer Media Corp and I had no extra money to spare on artwork, therefore I used my own. I am, *Marceau Rubenesque*."

Mary continued to eye him skeptically. He sighed aloud, realizing they had a long way to go in getting to know one another, no relationship could grow without trust and it was obvious she didn't trust him. Alec wondered if it was due to his reputation, or men in general? Had a man hurt Mary in the past? It was the only way she would come to know

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who he really was, but she wasn't making it easy.

"Mary, as long as you can linger on my negatives, I guess it makes it easier for you to not let me inside your heart. Maybe you should tell me why a beautiful, intelligent woman like yourself has never been married and is still a virgin at your age?"

He saw her face close down. It made him even more curious to know her secrets, but he wouldn't dare force the issue, in fear of pushing her farther away.

"Alec--"

"It's okay Mary, you don't have to tell me unless you want to." Alec interrupted. "But I do need you to at least give me a chance. You can't get to know me if you don't believe a word I say."

"I know, I'm sorry," Mary conceded.

Alec wasn't oblivious to the relief he saw on her face after he told her she didn't have to tell him why she was still unattached.

"With that said, I want to tell you things about me that only few know so that you can draw your own conclusions from there. If you still aren't interested in discovering if there could be something between us, then I can walk away knowing I did all that I could to make you at the very least, give me a chance."

She nodded. "So, you really are...Marceau Rubenesque?"

"The print-copy you have in your living area, I did the first year of college, it was my first Rubenesque portrait. The model's name is Karen and she has the original, otherwise I would offer to replace the one you have with the one I did in oil. The print doesn't do justice to the original oil painting. Maybe one day I can take you to see the original."

She gave him a beautiful Mona Lisa smile and his heart stumbled.

"Oh my God, I'm listening, and I believe you, but it somehow feels surreal knowing the truth. You're nothing like I pictured this artist to be," Mary laughed aloud. "Alec, you are truly a wonderful artist. I love your work!"

"Even though I'm not a brotha?" He teased.

"Well you can't be completely perfect," she mocked.

"Is that why you won't give me a chance? You don't care to be with me because I'm white?"

Her eyes grew wide as if she was shocked that he would even suggest that she was against interracial dating. "Of course not, Alec, I'm just not big on dating, and color has nothing to do with it."

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“So you do want to date, get married, and have children some day?”

“Look, I have hopes and dreams of love like every other woman. It’s just not easy finding a man that can truly love me, as I am, flaws and all. I found out the hard way, even if a man accepted my weight they couldn’t accept...”

“What Mary?” He leaned forward taking her hands between his. Seeing the turmoil on her face made him want to comfort her. He wanted to be the one she relied on to comfort her when she was down.

Alec could see himself falling in love with Mary, if he hadn’t already. He had no experience in such matters of the heart, but he knew that he did want her to be some significant part of his life; if not as a lover, then maybe a friend.

“Alec, please,” she shook her head.

“I told you stuff that few know about me, Mary. I even told you about the guilt I carry over my brother’s death, and no one knows that, but you. Can’t you share this with me.”

“I think,” Mary pulled her hands from his and he felt an ache deep in the pit of his stomach. “I think it’s getting late and after that long ride up here, I’m tired.”

“Mary,” he moaned.

“Alec, not tonight.” She turned her pleading gaze on him.

Disappointed he nodded. “I understand.” His green eyes glared into the dark brown orbs of her eyes for some sign that would give him hope. She was the first to look away.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized rotating away from him. “I...I don’t know if I can have an intimate relationship with anyone, no matter how much I may want to. Some things aren’t changeable, no matter how many Christmas wishes I’ve made over the years.”

“Maybe this time it’s possible.” He stared at her profile. “How about if the both of us wish for the same thing? All you have to do is tell me what you wish for, Mary.”

“Alec,” Mary chided. “Maybe, some day I will tell you, but not today.”

Alec watched her as she stood and he joined her. He could see the tears forming in her eyes and realized he would get no more out of her tonight. “Sweet dreams, Mary.” He murmured watching until she disappeared up the foyer steps to the second landing. He strolled over to the telephone and called Erica.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Mary looked at the digital clock on the bedside table as the number rolled over to 3:00 AM. She did manage to squeeze in at least two hours sleep before she roused up again to stare at the clock.

Sitting up on the side of the queen sized poster bed, her feet didn't reach the floor. This bed was higher off the ground than her bed at home, she wasn't use to having to climb bed-stairs to get into the bed. Why would anyone want a bed this high? It was just a longer drop to the floor when two hot and sweaty bodies were gyrating and rolling—

Damn, I have to stop thinking this way. I need something to do. “If I was at home I would have plenty to do. Hell, if I was at home I wouldn't be wondering if Alec Mercer slept in pajamas or naked?”

Mary slid down from the bed onto the cool polished pinewood floor. Naked as the day she was born she sauntered over to the settee at the foot of the bed and reached for an oversized canary-yellow t-shirt. Easing the shirt over her head and arms, the hem dropped to just above her knees. Sitting on the settee she slipped on a pair of fuzzy yellow socks.

Mary was happy the household was asleep, because glancing in the mirror she thought she looked like an African American “Big Bird”. Giggling, she ran a hand through her bed-head hair and fluffed it out with her fingers.

With hands on her hips, she looked around the beautifully rustically decorated bedroom; heavy wooden furniture, soft curtains encasing shuttered windows. What she believed she liked most about the room was the large river stone fireplace. She had one of those plug in pretend fireplace stoves in the corner of her room to add ambiance, but a real working fireplace was much better.

Restlessly she made her way towards its warmth. She held out her fingers towards the flame thoughtfully becoming mesmerized by the flickering flames licking between the burning logs in its hearth. It was as if she had a huge nightlight in the room. There was something haunting about her dancing shadow splayed against the walls. It also gave her a

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feeling of loneliness.

Mary wondered if she should add another log and decided against it, because it may make the room too hot and she didn't need any more heat. Her skin felt prickly and she felt restless. After she left Alec, she was strung so tight she had to masturbate to get to sleep.

Other times that would have been enough to get her through the night, but for the first time afterwards she cried because she felt a loneliness, she'd never felt before. It wasn't easy to please yourself when you knew you had a man that made it clear that he desired you sleeping under the same roof.

Mary released a deep sigh. How silly was this? She wished for a handsome and sexy man to live out all her fantasies with and here she stood alone in this room with its big bed alone and miserable.

She didn't have a choice. When he saw her body, the scars, he would be disgusted and it would break her heart to find out Alec was like every other man. She wanted him to be different. She needed him to be special, to give her hope that there was someone in this world who could fall in love with her for who she was.

Alec was one of limited few in his position that didn't have an issue with women because of their size. His appreciation for the full-figure woman showed in his artwork.

Mary wondered if she was cursed. She finally found a handsome, successful and talented man and now she had to reveal her secret. How do you tell someone you're attracted to that you have a skin disorder? Not just a simple case of adult acne but one that caused her to have to be extra careful with intimacy, because her lover had to be as concerned for her health as she was.

She had yet to meet any man that wanted to vest that much thought into making love to someone. Also, it required a lot of trust on her part. Any man she was intimate with would have to be completely loyal and committed to her. If he were to sleep with another, and catch something, even the simplest STD could kill her. With her restricted capability to take antibiotics, her options once infected were limited, if not nonexistent.

Mary knew Alec's reputation and because of it she couldn't picture him being faithful only to her. Nor could she picture him being patient and understanding of her plight, considering he was known for ditching women who became too demanding of his time.

"Damn you, Alec." She moaned. "Why didn't you allow me to continue thinking the worse of you? Why did you have to show me your vulnerable side? Why did you tell me you were my favorite artist? I never would have taken this job if I knew there was a

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possibility you would be attracted to me.”

Mary closed her eyes forcing back the tears that threatened to spill forth. She’d had the chance to grieve over her medical situation since diagnosed at seventeen. She finally found a way to live with what she couldn’t change. Now this.

She felt there was no way she could survive the fallout if she were to fall in love with Alec only to have him walk away from her once he saw her during a painful flare-up. The first and last attempt she made to become intimate with a man was a disaster; she couldn’t bare it if Alec looked at her with the same disdain.

Once again, she looked at her surroundings. It had all the amenities a woman could ever desire. This was the perfect place to be happy and raise a family. She wondered how Alec could think of this as just a holiday getaway house.

Mary allowed herself to daydream. This was her home with Alec. Built with a sturdy and sound interior. They wouldn’t have to worry about their children running loud and wild in the halls. She wondered if Alec wanted children, and if so, how many?

Shaking her head she massaged her temples moving away from the fireplace, it was causing too many fanciful thoughts. Flipping on the light switch, Mary made her way to the bathroom, plugged in her hot iron, and sat down to relieve her bladder. She was thankful the first thing she did after returning to her room was undo the damp braid and allow her hair to finish drying naturally.

Finishing up, she flushed the toilet and washed her hands while looking at herself in the mirror with a laugh. Her hair was all over the place and it was bad enough she had dark rings around her puffy eyes. Without sleep she couldn’t do anything about the rings, but the hair, oh yeah, its got to go.

Within the hour, Mary worked her magic with a bottle of hair-oil and a flat iron and considering it was four in the morning, she looked good. She winked at herself in the mirror and said, “Now what in the hell am I going to do? I’m still not sleepy.”

She decided to go downstairs; she saw some cocoa mix and mini-marshmallows in the kitchen cabinet earlier. Like a child sneaking out of her room on Christmas morning, she eased out into the hall and couldn’t ignore the call of the long corridor with it’s glistening wooden floor, it looked like the length of a bowling lane.

Mary took off in a run and slid across the floor in her socks releasing a fit of giggles when she came to a halt, the picture of Tom Cruise in *Risky Business* came to mind. “Eat your heart out Tommy, I’m a better dancer.” She did the butterfly and attempted to

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moonwalk her way to the staircase.

Halting at the top of the stairs she eyed the railing with a quirked brow, and shook her head in another fit of giggles as a wickedly childish thought came to mind.

“Oh hell, no, I can’t be thinking of doing this. What if I break my fool neck or worse I wake up Alec and he have to scrape my big ass off his expensive pinewood floor?”

She paused with purse lips and eyed the wooden railing. “Hey, a girl only gets this chance once in a lifetime. No one is around but me and I’m not tellin’ no one.”

Mary snickered and held on to the top rail tucked her long t-shirt between her thighs with her free hand before hoisting one of her stocky legs over the handrail in a straddled position, butt first, her heart was pumping adrenalin so fast she had to bite down on her back teeth to keep from bursting out loudly in nervous laughter.

“Oh shit, I can’t do this. It’s a lot higher up than I thought.” It never dawned to her that once she got this far she wouldn’t be able to go through with it. It seemed so easy for the people in the movies, but they probably were seventy-pounds lighter.

It felt sturdy enough, but it was the thought of landing that petrified her. “I really want to do this, because I hate being scared all the time. I’m scared to take chances, and most of all, I’m scared of falling in love.”

“Then stop being scared Mary, and let go. Trust me to catch you.” A deep voice carried up the steps.

She gasped peeping over her shoulder to see Alec in dark robe and slippers at the bottom of the steps. She squealed and heard him chuckle.

“Shit, Alec, I was just...I...I couldn’t sleep.” Mary could feel her entire face burning and she groaned burying her face in her shoulder holding tightly to the banister. Her butt was up in the air and she was sure from where he was standing he could see she was naked beneath her clothing from the way the tucked t-shirt dipped into the crevices of her big ass!

What a horrible position to find herself in. If she tried to get off the banister he was going to get an eye full and if she slid down towards him as he suggested then she probably would squish him when he tried to catch her, along with getting an eye full.

Look and see what you’ve done this time, Mary. She could hear her mother tsking in her head.

“Do you need me to come and help you?” Alec called up.

“I need you to go to bed so I can get my ass off this rail.” She yelled refusing to look and see if he was still eye balling her big butt.

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"Lucky rail," Alec murmured.

Mary gritted her teeth and slid a little lower her hold on the top rail was becoming perilous as her fingers started to go numb. "Alec, good night," she grunted.

"May I ask, why you are on my staircase banister at four something, in the morning?"

"I told you I couldn't sleep," she snapped.

"I see," Alec grinned. "I have a bottle of over the counter sleep aid if you would like. I think it's more relaxing than this."

She could hear the laughter in his voice. "Oh, damn."

"However, if you hump the rail in your own home to get to sleep, please feel free to enjoy mine. I'm sure it will still respect you tomorrow," he teased.

"Grrr," she growled at him. "I really don't think you want to piss me off right now, Alec. Please just go away." Her arms were beginning to shake from holding her weight in place.

"Just slide off," he suggested.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Cause."

"Cause, what?"

"Cause, I don't have on any panties, you idiot." Mary could feel the sweat beading on her brow; her bottom cheeks were starting to quiver from the exertion of holding on.

"Okay, you straddled a wooden pole with no underwear and I'm the idiot? Did you ever consider you could get splinters in your most delicate place?" He drawled.

"I wasn't thinking that far ahead. I was thinking about how easy it looked in the movies, like Tom Cruise in *Risky Business*, then, I thought about the times I saw people sliding down staircase banisters--"

"Mary, what are you talking about?"

"I don't know," she cried.

"Oh God, now I feel like we're doing a scene out of *I Love Lucy*," he mumbled.

She couldn't see him shaking his head, but she knew he was doing it and probably running a hand through that black thick beautiful hair of his too. Damn his gorgeous hide, he had awful timing.

"Enough, I'm coming up," he yelled.

"No! Please, just leave," she whined.

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“Mary, I can’t leave you like this. You’re upset and you’re liable to hurt yourself.”

“I wasn’t upset until you showed up. If you had been a gentleman you would have backed out of the room and left without me knowing!”

“Oh I see.” Alec laughed. “I will never understand the mental mechanics of a woman’s mind. “So, it would have been okay if I saw you, as long as I was a liar and never told you I saw you.”

Mary could hear his voice coming closer. Her fingers slipped and she slipped down more before she caught the rail once more. She didn’t know how much longer she could hold on like this, her entire body was screaming in pain from being in that position so long.

“No, damn you,” she sputtered. “Stop twisting my words around.” Mary tried to look over her shoulder once again to see if he was coming and realized her mistake when a sharp muscle spasm shot like fire through the side of her neck and shoulders.

Automatically she released the top railing with a scream, her hands dropping onto the banister to keep from toppling over the side onto the floor below.

She continued to scream while she descended the banister; it felt as if she was moving in slow motion, her heart beating so fast she could barely breathe. Before Mary knew it, she was flat on her back, spread eagled. Her body protested against her stupidity, but she was alive; thanks to all the extra cushion of flesh, she carried on her backside.

Mary didn’t know whether to laugh, because she did slide down the stair banister like she had always wanted to do, or to cry from the humiliation of her shirt being bunched up around her lower hips exposing every reason she had for intimately avoiding, Alec. She had no secrets now, for a few of her scars were splayed open for his inspection. She wanted to be able laugh this off and walk back up those stairs with pride, but she couldn’t stop the tears.

Alec didn’t think he’d ever experienced such fear, as he did the moment, Mary came tearing past him on the stair railing. He could barely breathe from the lump lodged in the back of his throat and if he had a weak heart, he surly would have died at that moment.

Foolish woman! What the hell was she thinking? If Alec wasn’t sure that he had fallen in love with her before, he was now.

“Mary...Mary...don’t you dare try and move until I make sure nothing is broken.” Alec came down on his knees and immediately started running his hands along her arms. Moving to her exposed thighs, he paused.

Staring at the lesions on her inner thighs. There was a patch of skin removed from her

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thigh indicating a skin graft. He knew from personal experience seeing how he had two similar scars, his acquired from a motorcycle accident. He wondered what had happened to her? As if she sensed him staring she squirmed to get away from him and he held her still. Surly she wasn't ashamed of something like this.

"Mary--"

"Please, don't say anything. Just leave me alone." She tugged her t-shirt down as far as she could, before turning on her side in a fetal position away from him.

"Sweetheart, you can't just lay here on the floor. Let me help you up to your room," he offered and received no response except for her sniffing.

With a deep sigh, Alec left her for a moment returning with two pillows and a thick quilted comforter that he'd pulled off his bed. Lifting her head Alec placed a downy pillow beneath her head and place another pillow next to hers before he reclined on the floor next to her and wrapped his body behind hers her.

Even though she stiffened from his closeness, she didn't tell him to leave. In a matter of minutes, he felt her body go slack against his and smile as he heard her softly snoring. He raised his head, leaned over and kissed her temple. Her ample bottom grazed against his penis seeking his warmth in her sleep. He hardened and stifled a heated moan.

Alec wanted to make love to her so bad his entire body shook with need, but he wanted their first time together to be special. It didn't take a genius to know that if he tried to make love to Mary now in her vulnerable state, he would just prove to her that everything she heard about him was true. That is, if there was a first time between them.

Being a "bad boy" had some advantages, but at this very moment he was beginning to feel as if it was a curse. He never considered the impact his past would have on his future if he were to fall in love; hell, he never thought he'd fall in love, especially this quickly.

He didn't want Mary thinking he was being nice to her to get into her pants. He just didn't know how to convince her that she wasn't just another conquest. She was a fresh change in his daily life; a challenging diversion, but that only allowed for a brief affair. His sweet silly Mary had him thinking long term.

Was he crazy to be thinking of her this way? The negativity they would face as a couple would bring difficulties he didn't need this late in his life. He didn't even know how their parents would react to the possibility of their dating and becoming serious. Just because his mother didn't like Erica, didn't mean she would like his alternative choice. He actually had no idea of their reactions, because in his household the subject never came up.

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Alec realized the pressure he was feeling about their future were premature. He had yet to know if Mary was capable of accepting him for who he was, regardless of his reputation. Until he knew if she was going to give them a chance, there was no reason to daydream over what could be.

Snuggling even closer, he tightened his hold, tucking her against him. His nose buried into the coconut-scented depths of her dark brown silky hair. She moaned aloud and buried her bottom into his erection and he shivered with pent- up desire. His breath caught in his throat, and he dared not move as Mary linked her fingers with his resting innocently on her stomach and guided it down between her legs.

She began to pump softly against his fingers. He closed his eyes and grit his teeth. Should he wake her up? No, she'd be mortified, if she awakened to find her hand pressing his against her moist pussy. Excitement coiled through him and mingled with a basic need to pleasure her.

His erection pressed uncomfortably against his briefs but it wasn't about his desire for a release, it was about her obvious yearning to be touched. In her unaware state she dared to seek what she didn't have the nerve to ask for when she was awake.

He wondered when was the last time someone held, touched, and caressed her as he was doing now? Had she ever known the comfort of a man's hand? There was so much he wanted to ask her? There was even more he wanted to do to her, but for now this would be enough.

Mary relaxed her hold on his hand and Alec smoothed his hand beneath the hem of her t-shirt. He savored the feeling of flesh touching flesh. She was hot and soft. Her sexy aroma stirred his sense. She was a mixture of charming innocence and untapped sensuality.

Alec matched the frantic pace set by her thrusting hips as his skillful fingers rubbed against her slickness. She whimpered sweetly as his hand guided one of her heavy legs over his thigh to get better access. His covered penis nestled between the cheeks of her naked bottom like a hot dog in a bun and he bit back a moan.

Each dry thrust of his lean hips against her caused the foreskin of his cock to shift up and down; he felt the familiar tension of pending release, building. Pre-cum seeped from the slit of his penis's head mingling in the dampness on the front of his briefs, caused by thrusting against Mary's wetness.

Out of his long list of conquests, he'd never felt a woman that had a pussy this pleasantly plump and juicy. He always had an attraction and a curiosity about being with voluptuous

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women, but he had never experienced it.

He lifted his head to get a better look at her face. Alec wondered what she was dreaming of? Had she reached for him because of her dreams or was she dreaming erotically because of his touch?

Alec's mind asked the questions he didn't dare ask aloud. *Is that it, my sweet Mary? Are you allowing me to love you in your dreams, yet you keep me at arms length when you're awake? Darling, do you touch yourself at night alone in your bed to ease your desires and keep you virginal?*

Achingly, he longed to know how it would feel to become one with Mary, to make love to a woman that he emotionally felt a connection to. He chanced to dip a finger into her tightness and imagined it was his cock, moving in and easing out before descending once more.

Hearing Mary's throaty moan, her breath coming in short gasps he knew she was close to coming. He held on to her, blessed with long fingers he kept his middle finger inside her while manipulated her clitoris with his thumb until she stiffened against him and cried out. A satisfied smile formed on his lips when he reveled in her whimper of his name.

Alec's fingers became drenched as her body shook and shivered in his arms. It was such a sweetly erotic thing to see her the pleasure on her lovely face and even though she appeared to still be sleeping, he found satisfaction in knowing he made her have an orgasm. His erect cock jerked once, then again before he felt a spurt of warmth against his abdomen.

His hold automatically tightened around Mary with a grunt and he rode the waves of his release. Alec mentally let go of all the sexual tension he had been holding since the night he ate Chinese's takeout at Mary's place. The woman had him all twisted in knots and he didn't know what the hell to do about it. He didn't know if there was a time in his life where he felt he was the *pursuer* of a woman.

He placed some space between them as not to dampen the back of her t-shirt from his soiled underwear. Rolling over on to his back he sighed reaching up to wipe the sweat from his brow and caught the smell of Mary on his fingers. He tasted a fingertip...mmm...sweet, musky and wonderful. Amazingly he felt his cock swelling once more.

"Damn," he whispered aloud. He wanted to make love to her all night and sleep with her in his arms. He couldn't do the first but there was nothing stopping him from enjoying the latter. He wanted Mary to know what he was feeling. He wanted to make sure that if she woke up and realized what had just happened between them, he wanted to be here to assure

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her of his sincerity.

As she softly snored, Alec wearily pushed himself off the floor to go to his bedroom to clean up and change. He went down on his hunches to tuck the comforter beneath her chin and kissed her brow. "I need you, sweet Mary, so whatever is bothering you please confide in me, so that we may move forward together," he murmured against her ear before rising. Crushing his urge to whistle gleefully, Alec made his way to his bedroom with a smile on his face.

By the time, Alec made his way back to the entranceway to return to his place beside Mary on the floor he found her gone. He wouldn't have believed the entire scene had taken place if it hadn't been for the pillows and comforter remaining on the floor.

Alec groaned wondering if indeed she had been awakened while he was touching her and remained silent due to her embarrassment. There was no way to be sure. It could have been when he removed his body heat she woke up, saw she was on the floor alone, and made her way back upstairs to her own bed.

He placed his foot on the first step prepared to go to her and halted, closing his eyes with a deep sigh. He couldn't go to her. What would he say? I masturbated you while I thought you were sleep. You appeared to enjoy it, so lets do it again now that you're awake?

"Pffft! Yeah that's a romantic thing to do." His hand gripped the stair rail causing a silly grin to come to his face. He shook his head in disbelief. "Crazy woman actually slid down this railing, hell I didn't even do something so stupid when I was a kid. Didn't she realize people didn't do this shit for real? Or at least not from one this high up."

Alec released a curse. "Damned woman. She's got me up at five in the morning, talking to my freakin' self." He turned, picked up the pillows and comforter and slowly made his way back to his own empty bed, hoping Mary would change her mind and come back; maybe she went to clean up too and had planned to come back.

Hopeful, he turned, stood looking at the stairs and waited, listening for sound that indicated she was coming back. After a few minutes, he realized it was wishful thinking on his part. Mary had probably awakened all alone on the floor, came to her senses, or worse thought he had abandoned her to remain sprawled on the floor alone for the rest of the night.

He threw the pillows on the bed and climbed between the downy cool sheets. Alec angrily punched the pillows a couple of times before settling in. He turned on his side, caught the trace of Mary's scent on the pillow, and took a long deep breath. Reaching down to touch himself, he mentally relived the moments he held her in his arms.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

After waking up from a fitful sleep, Mary took an extra long soak in the tub and took even longer to get dress. She changed clothing at least four times before settling on a spiced colored crochet baby doll blouse over jeans and brown suede flat-heeled ankle boots.

She took another hour to apply light makeup and twist her hair atop of her head with two chopsticks. Nothing seemed to be working in making her feel better. How was she supposed to face a man that she worked for and had a crush on, the morning after she humiliated herself in more ways than one?

Should she go downstairs pretending like nothing had happened, well, she couldn't pretend that she didn't nearly kill herself on the stairs, nor could she ignore the fact that she had cried in front of him. Even if she wanted to play oblivious, it didn't mean that he would go along with the farce.

Mary's face flushed a bright red. She could feel the sensation of shame all the way up to the burning of her ears, as the memory of her wanton behavior haunted her. Even though she was embarrassed by her behavior, a familiar throbbing occurred between her legs. Her body ached for more. She somehow felt incomplete.

When she awakened to see her hand pressing against Alec's hand between her thighs, while she humped against his fingers, she couldn't let him know she was aware of what was happening to her. Lying there in the warmth of Alec's arms pretending to be asleep, as his fingers stroke and eased her was the most wonderful sensation she'd ever felt. Touching herself had never brought her such an intense feeling.

Even now the sound of Alec's heavy breathing in her ear, the way he grunted, held his breath, then groaned his release made her wet all over again. She didn't think she heard anything as gloriously sexy as the deep throaty sounds of Alec when he came. Mary also remembered him kissing her forehead and whispering he "needed her". Knowing he needed her made her feel soft and vulnerable. She'd never thought she would have a man say such a thing to her.

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Mary groaned and dropped down on the side of the bed, her wide shoulders drooping. What was she going to do? She was falling in love with Alec. She wanted him to need her. Not just because he needed an assistant, not because he was very sexual and needed a woman to relieve his boredom. She wanted him to want a serious relationship with *her*, something that would lead to marriage and children.

No. Mary shook her head. Men like Alec didn't marry women like her. The moment she gave in to him and they became lovers, he would probably drop her. She would become another one of the many women he managed to bed, a virgin no less.

If her scars didn't scare him away from touching her as he did, then she would bet top dollars that his male ego to conquer every female he met kept his hand between her legs. However, he couldn't bear to stay by her side afterwards.

Mary eyes burned with tears she didn't have left to shed, after crying the rest of the night away until she fell into an exhausted sleep. The one thing Mary knew is she had to make it through the week because she had promised him, but there was no way she could continue to work with him once they got back home.

The awkwardness alone would be unbearable. Now that her heart was involved she couldn't work at Mercer Corp at all. Everyday she would know he was there, somewhere, telling someone else he needed her. For all she knew he hadn't really called Erica and broken off the engagement.

Still, if Alec was willing, she suppose if she was going to lose her virginity, choosing a man with his lengthy experience would be a good place to start. If she willingly went to his bed, she would eventually find out if he was sincere in his pursuit or if he just wanted sex.

Hell, the physical chemistry between them was no joke; it was erotic and powerful. A force that couldn't be denied and especially after this morning feeling his hands on her. Slowly, her hand stole between her legs, imagining Alec's unforgettable touch.

Quickly she removed her hand and released a long string of curses. She wanted him and now that he had spoiled her she didn't think she would every feel satisfied by touching herself, again!

"So why not let you be my first? I can do this, I know I can."

With her mind made up, Mary checked her reflection in the mirror one last time. She removed her glasses and left them on the dresser before she opened the door and headed towards the stairs. To her surprise, Alec was sitting at the bottom of the stairs. He turned on the step to look up at her. Had he actually been waiting? For how long, she wondered.

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"It's about time you came out of that bedroom. I was about to break down the fuckin' door and let myself in," Alec said tersely. "Are you okay? You aren't sore today are you?"

Mary brow lifted and she could feel the heat spreading over her face. "Sore? Should I be?"

"Yes, after turning my staircase into some freakin' amusement ride," he voice grew louder. "You scared me half to death. Mary, you must promise me you will never do anything so foolish again."

"Oh, that's what you were talking about." She released a sigh of relief. "Don't worry, my days of riding staircases are behind me."

"That's good to hear. Now, I was talking about the staircase, what else would I be talking about?" He asked, but to her it sounded as if he was fishing.

Mary chanced another glance at him. Why was he grinning up at her like that? Damn, she thought he was so fine, dressed in black form fitting jeans and a charcoal colored turtle neck sweater. If she wasn't sure about asking him to relieve her of her virginity before she left the bedroom she was now.

The only way to get over Alec Mercer was to get under Alec Mercer with thighs spread wide, she decided. Yep, she would let him ride her until she had excercised this sexual demon he turned loose inside her.

"Why are you staring at me that way?" His deep voice cut through her thoughts.

How should she handle this? Should she allow him to make all the moves and just let it happen? No, that wasn't any good. If she handled it that way it would give him the upper hand and that would mean when he broke it off she would get hurt. If she maintained control of when they did it, then she could walk away without regrets.

Mary decided the only way was to tell him what she wanted and to let him know she didn't want a relationship, or anything else.

"Mary?"

"Huh?"

"I asked why are you staring at me that way?" Alec repeated.

"Uh, what way?"

"Like you want to say something and you're not sure if you should," he supplied.

Mary thought for a moment and took a deep breath, slowly descending the stairs as he came to his feet. "Not something I want to say, but there is something I want to ask of you."

"Stop right there." He shouted and her mouth clamped shut pensively as she continued

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descending the stairs.

“No, I didn’t mean stop talking, I mean stop on that step,” His deep voice softened. “Before you ask, can you do something for me first?”

“What?” Her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“You’ll see,” he answered. “Now come down two more steps...that’s it...stop!” He came up one step.

“Alec, what are you doing? I really need to speak with you.”

“Afterwards.”

“After what?”

He came up two more steps until he was standing in front of her. With the differences in their height, it put them nose-to-nose. He placed his hands on her hips a beaming smile on his face, as if he had accomplished some great feat. “Perfect. Now, I can give you a proper good morning.”

Her eyes followed his tongue as he moistened his lips and she did the same because it was a sure sign a kiss was comin’ and boy, she was ready for it. If Alec hadn’t initiated the kiss, she would have...eventually...maybe.

“Good morning, my sweet Mary.”

He took her face in his hands and tilted her face to the right as he went to the left. Painfully, slowly, he teased her mouth with his relaxed lips sliding back and forth until he seemed satisfied he found the perfect fit of his mouth against hers.

Even though she could feel his body’s response to her nearness was as ardent as her own, he acted as if he had all the time in the world to do nothing, but stand there and establish the beginnings of the perfect kiss.

Mary could barely breathe from the anticipation of what was to come. She was tense and giddy at the same time. She felt as if she was about to soil her panties on his kisses, that was, if he would get on with it. What was he waiting for? Did he want her to kiss him, she moved to capture his lips and he pulled back with a grin. His thumbs caressed her cheeks, like whispering feathers.

Take me already! Her mind screamed. She heard a whimper emanate from her throat she bit down on her bottom lip in surprise. *Where did that come from?*

The moment she released her bottom lip and blew out a long sigh, Alec was there to steal it from her as he took advantage of her parted mouth. Mary never knew a kiss could be so overwhelmingly tender and adoring. A single tear slowly glided down her cheek and he

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wiped it away with his thumb.

"It's okay," he murmured against her mouth, nuzzling her nose with his nose. "You're so beautiful."

She wanted to call him a liar, and decided against it. Was it possible under the kindness of his kisses, her face flushed with arousal, she was beautiful? The way he was looking at her made her feel beautiful.

Was the earth shaking? Her body seemed to be vibrating and humming against his, the sexual energy was so strong it felt almost spiritual. Being in Alec's arms was like Feng Shui of lips touching lips, body touching body, spirit touching spirit. The feel of Alec's chest against her breast, caused her to feel his heart beating.

"Kiss me again," she demanded.

Perfection. Their mouths kissed and his tongue touched, caressed, and mated with hers. Both of them releasing a sigh of surrender causing the air between them to blow hotly out of their noses, against the other's face as the kiss deepened.

Mary leaned into his possessive hold. She tightened and bunched up his sweater in her fist to remain upright as she felt her knees buckle. Alec's hold on her tightened arching her to the side resting her back on his arms, he dipped and French kissed her until she was completely pliant against him. She had become oblivious to the fact they were still standing on the stairs.

Mary completely trusted Alec to keep her from falling. She was falling head over hills in love and more than ever desired him to be her first lover. Another tear escaped between her tightly closed lids. She didn't want to cry she was content with her decision, she was happy to be spending this time with Alec, no matter when or how it ended.

He was the first to break the kiss. He caught her descending tears with the soft touch of his lips to each cheek in turn.

"Look at me Mary," he ordered. Without hesitation she opened her eyes. "Good morning."

Mary slowly grinned. "Good morning, Alec."

His hands reached down, cupped both cheeks of her jean-clad buttocks, and held on. Her brow lifted in question.

"It feels good to feel these in my hands, I have some very fond memories of being nestled between them, earlier this morning." He winked and asked, "Why did you leave me? I wanted to spend the rest of the morning holding you."

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“You did?” Her eyes widened in surprise. “Uh, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You know after I thought about it, because I couldn’t sleep for thinking about it.” He quirked a dark eyebrow at her and continued, “I realized you hadn’t been asleep, well you were when you reached and pushed my hands between your legs, but afterwards you felt everything I did to you.”

“Please,” Mary tried to pull away but he wasn’t having it. She was mortified. Did he have to be so blunt about it and give a play-by-play replay?

“I wasn’t trying to fool you. I was so embarrassed after I notice my hands were pressing your hand between my legs. I couldn’t bare it if you laughed at me especially after I did slapstick comedy on this staircase,” Mary explained.

“Crazy woman, do you think you have enough to strength to keep my hand there if I didn’t want it to be there? I wanted what you wanted, except I need more,” Alec said. “If I hadn’t thought I would embarrass you and risk you stopping me from touching you, I would have begged you to touch me.”

“You would have?”

He smiled a closed lip smile, softening the hard lines of his masculine features. “Of course I would sweetheart, my entire body ached for your touch...to be inside you.”

She shrugged, “If I hadn’t ran like a scared rabbit to my bedroom the minute you left my side, I would have known this. You must find my lack of experience, childish and boring.”

“Are you kidding me?” He chuckled. “You are anything but boring Ms. Mary Christmas, and your lack of experience excites the hell out of me.”

“Really?”

“Why would I lie about such a thing? Besides, I have enough experience for the both of us.” He playfully wiggled his eyebrows at her in emphasis.

Mary’s face gave him an impish smile and leaned forward to kiss him once more. He made her feel so much better. Hopeful.

“So, you said you have been thinking about what happened and I hope you have also been thinking about giving us a shot, or do you mean you been thinking about it and now you have regrets about what happened between us?”

Mary answered his question with a question. “Besides my not touching you, do you have any other regrets?”

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He stole her breath away with a devastating grin. "I would have thought that kiss put all your doubts to rest."

"Just a little," she giggled. "It felt...no, the way you're gripping my ass, it feels as if you want to explore things a bit more. Do you think you are going to be letting go of me anytime soon?"

"You know me very well, seeing how you haven't known me long." Alec kissed her once more and she opened her mouth to accept his kiss.

"I beg your pardon, I'm a big fan of your work, so I've been watching you closely for the past two years and I feel as if I know you."

"Then you have me at a disadvantage, I feel as if I can't find out enough about you. I want to know everything. Your favorite colors, foods, songs, authors and movies--"

Mary placed her hand over his lips to stop him. "Okay, I get it. There is no rush is it? We have this week to spend getting to know one another."

"You're still sticking to the one week plan, huh?" Alec mumbled.

When he released his hold on her bottom and pulled away to walk down stairs with her trailing on his heels, she almost felt a chill from the sudden lack of contact with his body; she actually found herself craving his nearness.

She didn't know if it was because Alec sensed her needs or he felt the same way she did, he laced his hand with hers, their palms fulfilling the need their lips couldn't while strolling towards the kitchen.

Mary released a loud gasp of surprise as her back made contact with the wall and before she could protest Alec was pressing his body into hers. Passionately, possessively, tenderly, he kissed her.

She remained breathlessly stunned by his actions, not to mention her entire body was itching for more. She didn't think she'd been touched, teased, and man handled so much in her entire life, as she had since being in Alec's company. She liked it. It was wonderful having a man just hands length away at most times, to touch and to be touched anytime the urge seized you. God help her, how was she going to walk away from him after the week was over?

Panting heavily, Alec pressed his forehead to hers. "Since you're only giving me a week, I'm going to make the best of every minute of it, so you might as well get use to my touching you quickly."

Releasing her and clasping her hand once more they finally made it to the kitchen.

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To both their surprise they found George already in the kitchen working on breakfast. He was a heavysset fellow with snow-white hair, mustache and beard. His cheeks looked as if he suffered from Rosacea, then again, it could be from the heat of the griddle as he flipped a row of pancakes.

Mary tried to tug her hand from Alec's, but he held on refusing to let her go, so she stood by his side and smiled at George who turned his twinkling blue eyes on them.

"Good morning kids," his white shaggy eyebrows wiggled mischievously as he spoke and Mary blushed wondering if he had somehow caught some of the action that had transpired between her and Alec on the steps or in the hallway. He could get a good view of the hall from where he stood at the oven. "I bet you two are starving this morning, go ahead and have a seat and I will fetch things to the table."

"It smells delicious," Mary said as she took a seat in the chair Alec held out for her.

"Yes, it does." Alec agreed with hands resting on her shoulders, he leaned over and whispered against her ear. "But, you smell better and I guarantee you taste sweeter than mom's homemade molasses."

Mary eyes grew wide and heat went beyond her full face, it spread all over her body like wildfire. She turned a warning glare on him. He just took a seat across from her grinning like the spoiled kid that kept going in the cookie jar even after he'd been caught.

He wink at her and she thought, *damn him, for being so handsome and adorable.*

"How are the roads this morning, are they still passable?" Mary asked, noting out of the corner of her eyes how Alec stiffened and the boyish grin faded from his face. Did he think she was asking because she still wanted to leave?

"Well, it's heating up a bit Miss, so much of the ice that was on the roads is melting, it should be okay." George supplied, placing a plate of pancakes and bacon both crisp and limp before them. He moved to the counter and reached for soft scrambled eggs and steaming hot biscuits. Bustling away for a moment he returned with a bowl of white pepper gravy and hash brown potatoes with chopped onions.

Mary's mouth dropped wide. "Wow, are you feeding an army?" She grinned, her stomach growling with growing hunger from the smells alone.

"I wasn't sure what you liked, and just in case you didn't care for pancakes, like Al here, I figured you could enjoy one thing or the other."

She saw Alec grin, but it didn't appear to reach his eyes. Suddenly, he seemed immersed in his own thoughts.

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Mary didn't miss the long look George gave Alec before smiling and saying, "Is there a reason you'd be askin' about the roads, Miss? Is there somewhere you would like to be going?"

"Call me, Mary, please, and yes, I was hoping Alec would drive me down to the stables to see the horses and sleigh he told me about."

Was that relief she saw on his face? Was he truly worried that she wanted to go home after what had happened between them. *No, Mr. Mercer, I have big plans for us.*

"Great! I would love to show you and even if the road aren't drivable we can snowmobile down there." Alec piped up and offered her a couple of pancakes.

"Just one pancake is fine," Mary said heaping a spoon full of eggs on her plate. He nodded as she offered him a serving. "I was wondering if you were the one to guide the sleigh?" she asked Alec.

"No, actually there is an orphanage about fifteen miles down the road. George dresses up as Santa--"

Mary turned to the older man who was leaning against the cabinet drying his hands on a dishtowel. "I knew you looked familiar," she laughed.

"Yep, that's me, good old Santa Clause. Now, Al, tell her what you are, son."

Alec turned red as a beet and became very studious in his search for the soft pieces of bacon. "I'm sure Mary, don't care to hear about this George, shouldn't you be getting back to the lodge. The fellas will be in for lunch before you know it."

"Boy, I've been doing this routine since back when you were in diapers so I don't need you reminding me of what needs to be done and when. Now tell the pretty lady the truth about you being one of Santa's little helpers." George chuckled and walked over to remove his coat off the hook by the kitchen door.

"Alec, you're...you're an elf!" Mary said gleefully.

"No, I'm a *union-worker* and we are employees of Santa. Except I'm really thinking about going on strike this year."

Mary laughed and so did he. She liked the sound of his laughter along with the way his beautiful green eyes sparkled beneath his foolishly long lashes. She felt a sudden urge to reenact another movie scene and swipe everything off the table on to the floor except the syrup, that she would pour all over his body.

She cleared her throat and looked down at the food on her plate.

"Why are you blushing?" Alec asked.

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“Huh? Black women don’t blush, haven’t you heard?” She fluttered her lashes at him.

“Well you do, all the time,” he laughed. “Have I told you yet today that you have the most beautiful eyes?”

Affectionately, she reached out and touched his freshly shaven face with the back of her hand.

Alec smiled warmly at her.

“I didn’t know you dressed up in costume and took gifts to the local orphanage.”

“There is much we have to learn about one another, Mary.” He covered and held her hand to his face. “I believe so far all you’ve heard is the bad and gossip.”

“True,” she admitted. “Can I ask why you allow the media to know only the nonchalant rich playboy side of you?”

“I suppose being a playboy is what the public expects from most wealthy single bachelors. As long as my family and friends know who I really am, I don’t feel the need to counteract the tabloids.” Alec shrugged his broad shoulders, allowing Mary to pull away her hand.

She watched him. With bent head he looked down at his plate forking his leftover eggs as he continued to speak, “Besides, if I made what I do public, then who is it benefiting me or the children. No, I won’t have the orphanage bombarded with the media, just to paint myself in a better light.”

Mary nodded, her eyes not missing the fact George had quietly slipped out of the kitchen, leaving them alone. There was something very cozy about them sitting here like this in the kitchen, talking. It made her imagine doing this for the rest of her life. Curiously she wondered how Alec would look twenty years from now. Would his dark hair be silver? Would the crinkles of laughter beside his eyes deepen?

She pushed her plate aside and nursed the cup of coffee in her hands after Alec gave her a refill from the coffee pot and warmer sitting on the table. “I want you to know that I’m sorry. I believe I was one of those people that thought the worse about you. I think it was because it was easier.”

“Easier? Why?”

“Well, when a girl like me fantasizes about men they see in the media, on television, or in the movies, they dream like other women of the possibilities that a guy like you would want her. Then, we pass a mirror and we see the beautiful stick figured women you’re with and reality crashes in causing us to down a pizza and a pint of the most fattening ice cream

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we can find--" Mary's voice faded into a nervous giggle. Alec wasn't laughing.

"Mary, do you not like the way you look?"

Mary looked away from his searching eyes. "I don't know. I use to think I looked okay, of course, not a size six okay, but a size eighteen okay."

"If that is true, why do you put yourself down?"

She shrugged her round shoulders. "I suppose I do it before anyone else can. It doesn't hurt as much when I say it."

"Then I don't want to hear you do it anymore, because it hurts me when you do it. I think you are beautiful as you are, with a heart to match. Unless you're with a very shallow man, he has to be blind to not notice that you are a special woman."

Before she could protest he added, "I know my actions in the past have spoke differently, but those days are over. I'm coming out of the closet," Alec winked and chuckled. "You want to call a press conference so I can shout it to the world?"

Laughing she asked, "Shout what to the world?"

"That I'm a fat chaser, that I love plump women. That I am the artist, Rubenesque, and I secretly covet what I wasn't brave enough to express in my real world, until now," Alec confessed with a wide grin.

"Stop joking," Mary playfully hit at hand.

Alec's face grew serious. "Mary, I mean it." Mary's grin faded as she listened in stunned disbelief. "I will pick up the phone right now and have my agent schedule a press conference to reveal my reclusive artist identity."

"Alec," Mary breathed. "Why? Why would you do such a thing?"

"I would do it in a minute if it would mean that you will never think you weren't good enough for men like me. My fear is, that because of what you already know about me you won't believe a damn thing that I say to you. Including the fact that I like you the way that you are and seeing those wonderful big thighs in jeans, nearly drives me out of my freakin' mind."

Mary didn't know what to say.

Alec took a swig of coffee and muttered, "Was it the guard at the office you dated that led you to believe you weren't beautiful the way you are? If it was I'll fire him once we return."

Her eyes grew wide with disbelief. How did Alec know she had gone out with one of the guards at work? It was only for about a month or two, with nothing coming of it. Until

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she found out he was liar and had a bet that he could get her into his bed. A horrified thought came Mary's mind. *Had everyone been talking about that in the office behind her back?*

He placed his half consumed cup of coffee on the table before him. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I guess everyone got a big laugh at my expense," she frowned. "Tell me, Alec, did you place a bet for or against me losing my virginity in Bill's bed? Is that why you were surprised I was still a virgin because you believed the lies he spread?"

He held up a hand. "Shield the claws kitten, and you're wrong. I didn't know anything about a bet, I just overheard a few of the guards in the parking garage as I was leaving discussing the sweet lady that made gifts for everyone, was dating one of their own." Alec's eyes narrowed. "Are you telling me that son-of-a-bitch asked you out for some childish prank?"

Mary calmed down at his angry tone. She reached out and placed her hand over his resting on the table. "It's over and I survived it. Nothing happened between us and the fellows that are my friends in the guard-shack let me know what was going on. He apologized and it's done," Mary explained. "No harm done."

"That's not true. Now you're hesitant about allowing yourself to open up to me or any other man that is interested in you." Alec intertwined his fingers with hers. "At least I understand better why you would be wary about the dating thing."

"I'm more curious at this moment in why you were you sneaking around the guard desk long enough to hear that conversation?"

"Hey!" Alec balked. "I don't have to sneak around my own office building."

"I know those guys, they never would have been indulging in office chit-chat if they had seen you. Everyone walks on eggshells when the boss is around," Mary pointed out.

Alec rolled a discarded toothpick between his fingers with his free hand a chagrined smile on his lips. "Okay, I was curious about you and I kind of asked if they had heard if you were seeing anyone."

"You're lying!" Mary laughed out cutting her eyes at him. "The guys would have told me something like that."

"Not if they wanted to keep their jobs," Alec said sternly. "Since we are being honest here, I might as well come clean. My curiosity actually began after Halloween of last year."

"Oh," was all she said. She remembered that Halloween well.

"Exactly," he chuckled. "You were the only one that came to work dressed up for

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Halloween, our own little Raggedy Ann.”

Mary moaned and laid her head on the table unable to look at him. That was one of the top five humiliating incidents of her life. Of course, with last night's escapades on the steps it moved down to the number three spot.

Number one had to be her heel breaking off her boot when she was about to take a step down into the school cafeteria. The heel bounced down the steps, as if in slow motion, and the other students in the entire lunchroom became quiet only bursting out in mutual laughter once the runaway heel bounced off the bottom step onto the floor.

Mary moaned again. No, that number one has to go to the time she came out of the girl's bathroom at the restaurant on prom night with the tail of her dress tucked in her pantyhose and she wasn't wearing any underwear. Yep, that was still the number one ditzzy moment of her life.

“I looked awful, go ahead and say it,” Mary wailed covering her face with both hands.

“No,” Alec chuckled. “Sweetheart, I thought you looked adorable, there was something about those thighs again in those black and white striped tights, I'm getting heated just thinking about it.” He laughed

“If you're heated, it's because of the hot coffee,” Mary scoffed.

“Nonsense, it was from that day on you had my respect. I thought you were very brave and self-confident to walk out of the house in such a getup,” Alec assured her. “Anyone else would have went home at lunch and changed clothing after realizing no one else dressed up; but, not you. You toughened the entire day and continued handing out wrapped baked brownies—which were delicious by the way—from that big basket you carried. You were so cute skipping from one work station to another.” He shook his head with a chuckle.

“On my behalf let me say, I thought I could loosen up the office a bit and I campaigned hard to get my coworkers to participate. Several said they were thinking about it. I think I was more disappointed then surprised that no one but me dressed up for Halloween.” Mary gave him a dimple smile and added, “Well at least you dressed up that day.”

A slight frown puckered Alec's brow. “I didn't dress up for Halloween last year.”

“Yeah, you did,” she rolled her eyes and sighed. “You wore these hideous colorful green and blue plaid pants with this bright yellow pull over shirt with a plaid matching plaid collar and even had a hat to match. It was okay, but you would have made a better clown if you had worn some big shoes and put some clown makeup on,” Mary reasoned. “Maybe, one of those big red noses, a orange curly afro.

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To her surprise Alec threw back his head and released a loud stream of laughter. She grinned thinking he was the most beautiful man she'd ever seen this close up. She really loved his near flawless white smile.

"Mary, you're killing me," Alec wiped away the tears of laughter from his eyes with the back of his hands. "That wasn't a costume. I had to rush to the office straight from the golf course and I didn't have time to change."

Her face flushed with color. "Oops. What were you doing on that golf course? Hitting the ball or trying to scare it into the hole?"

Alec laughed. "Oh my God woman, you're priceless. I don't remember the last time I've laughed so much." He held up the palm of his hand. "What I do remember is anticipating the moment you'd get around to delivering one of your brownies to me. I even left my office door open awaiting the moment you'd skip so I could watch your *hooters* bounce--"

"Alec!" Mary's mouth dropped wide before her face crumpled in laughter.

"Hey, we are being honest and I'm just telling you what I was thinking at that time." His eyes dropped below her chin and grinned when she crossed her arms over her breasts.

"Here it is over a year later and it seems to me you're still thinking the same thing," Mary chastised. "Eyes are up here, *Mister*."

Alec cleared his throat. She was glad to see he followed instructions well as his green eyes bore into hers. "Anyway, I don't remember the last time I felt so disappointed. When my assistant came in and placed the brownie on my desk, I realized you'd already stopped by."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know. It never dawned on me to be bold enough to walk into the big boss's inner sanctum and disturb you by handing you a brownie."

"I didn't think it was silly at all, I think it was very sweet and it still is, that you try every year to get others to participate. I promise next Halloween I will dawn on the green tights and elf hat, so you won't be celebrating alone."

Mary could only feel delight in the fact that he spoke of them still working together come next fall.

"I can't wait to see you all dressed up," she admitted aloud. "Too bad I got to go home at the end of the week or I would get to see you and George dressed up for Christmas."

"Oh, you must stay now, Mary. There is no way I'm missing out on taking someone with me who loves Holidays as much as you do. Besides, the kids will get a kick out hearing

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that your name is Mary Christmas.” He touched the tip of her nose. “I like it that you aren’t wearing your glasses, I love your eyes.”

Mary found it an endearing thing to say and her heart thumped rapidly in her chest. She remembered his touch to another part of her body and raw sexual warmth spread through her as she stumbled for words to clear her mind from such thoughts. “If...if I knew about the orphanage I would have gladly brought my, *Mrs. Santa*, outfit, but I didn’t so I suppose it will be best for me to go home.”

“No problem, we can throw something together for you,” Alec countered, obviously ignoring her comment about going home.

Mary shook her head and said, “I don’t think so. I don’t sew well.”

“You don’t have to, my mother use to make my clothes as a kid, it was cheaper then buying them. She can have you ready to go in no time.”

“Alec, what about my parents? Remember, my father is not feeling well, that is the main reason I was returning.”

“If your father isn’t up to making the ride, I will make sure that your parents arrive by helicopter along with my parents, that is if the weather is passable. If it’s not then we all will be stuck where we’re at.”

“No matter what I say you are going to have an answer, aren’t you?”

“Say you’ll spend Christmas and New years with me, Mary. I really would love for you to meet the rest of my family.”

Mary knew better than to argue with him. At the office she had witnessed Alec get his way, with charm and stubbornness. He could be tenacious when he wanted something, and at the moment he was making it clear that she was the something he was wanting. The thing that bothered Mary was, for how long? Would it be days, months, or years, before he grew tired of her?

She shrugged off the familiar doubts that threaten to kill her current state of happiness. She would relax and enjoyed whatever time they had together. No matter what happened, she didn’t think she’d ever felt happier.

Mary stared at Alec in awe as he spouted off every holiday costume she’d worn to work in the past.

“I always looked forward to each holiday at the office where you would do something to make it more festive. Like, the heart apron on Valentine’s Day. You would have a basket of heart-shaped “Be Mine” cookies. On St. Patrick’s Day you wear the green dress and

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pantyhose and give out green shamrock shaped *Rice Krispie's* bars. I wonder can we find those stockings you wear at Christmas, the ones that are red and white stripes. All I can think about when I see you in them is how your legs look like big candy canes and I get this crazy urge to lick my way up."

As usual Mary couldn't refrain from the heat spreading across her face and ears, but it made her feel good somehow, knowing he noticed her escapades in his office and not once had he ever refrained her from dressing up and handing out goodies. Now she knew why, the cad had been eyeing her bodily wares.

"You really are a leg man aren't you?" She asked quirked a dark eyebrow at him.

"I am now," he admitted and brought her hand up to his mouth and kissed her palm.

"If I knew you were into voluptuous women, I wouldn't have missed all those golden opportunities to come to you personally. So I settled with getting little glimpses of you through your open office door," she confessed.

From the look on his face, she saw it was his turn to be surprised. "Mary, why didn't you take a chance on me? Have I've been such a Scrooge, that you didn't even consider chancing it just once?"

"Yes, of course I considered it, dreamed about it, but after everything, I heard and read about you. I..." she paused.

"What?"

"I wasn't sure if I wanted to meet you. I was scared that you were everything they said about you and I didn't want to be disappointed, if it were true," she said honestly. "I knew I liked looking at you. I found your appearance as handsome and refined as some of the heroes I read about in books. I'd never dreamt that you could be interested in me." Mary held up her hand.

"Before you protest, I'm not saying it because of my weight." She became increasingly uneasy under his thoughtful scrutiny. "I was thinking more that you wouldn't be interested once you found out about my illness?"

"Illness?" Alec took both of her hands in his and held them. "Is it serious?"

She saw the worry lines crinkled across his brow and around his mouth. He was truly concerned. It touched her heart and gave her the strength to say what needed to be said, before she allowed herself to fall any deeper in love with him. How could she expect to become his lover without him knowing the truth about her? He saw some of her scars last night, and seemed to be handling it well.

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"First, let me tell you it's not contagious or life threatening unless I were to develop an infection that is not responsive to antibiotics. At this time there is no known cure, and as far as I can tell there isn't enough government or public funding to find one."

"Mary, please, you're frightening me. What the hell is wrong with you? Is it some strange form of cancer or what? Just say it baby."

"I'm sorry this is the only way I know how to explain it. I don't talk about this to many people, just my family and others in my support group." Mary pulled in a deep breath and released it slowly. "Alec, I have what is known as *Hidradenitis Suppurativa*. The doctor first diagnosed me when I was seventeen. I thought it was cancer at first because it started with a single knot under my left arm. I was so scared I kept it to myself until it got to the point that it was so painful, I could no longer ignore what it was doing to my body."

"Mary," his voice softened as he squeezed her hand in his.

"I figured if I worked really hard to get healthy that it would just disappear. I started exercising regularly, lost weight, and doing a lot of praying. One day it disappeared as quickly as it seemed to appear and I thought all was well."

"So, it can be maintained? This illness?"

"Hidradenitis has a pattern of coming and going. It's the nature of this illness. I cannot have any symptoms for months...years even, and then without warning, you get a flare-up that makes even the most mundane daily activities hell."

She looked down at his pale hands intertwined with hers. He had big, veined hands with clean squared tipped nails. Something about their masculine beauty exuded a comforting, yet underlying strength.

Mary thought of a time when she was frightened by the strangeness of her own body. She would have sold her soul to have someone to hold her and soothe away her fears with such hands. Instead she suffered in silence...alone.

As if sensing her need to be touched. Alec reached out and cupped her chin, tilting her face up to look at him. "Tell me what you're thinking?"

"During spring break of the year I was to graduate I spent the day at the lake. Once I got home I took a shower and when I dried off with a towel there was blood on it," she swallowed back the lump in her throat.

"Oh, Mary, sweetheart I can't imagine the fear you must have felt at such a young," Alec soothed. His hand moved from her chin to caress a strand of hair behind her ear.

"I was terrified but I was more fearful of going to the doctors and them telling me I was

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dying. The knot under my arm, hurt really bad, and I thought it was okay since it wasn't hurting anymore. It had broken through the skin and it appeared as if my flesh was coming out of the opening."

"My God, Mary, I'm so sorry you had to go through this and you were practically a kid. Please, tell me everything. I want to know all that I can. We can find the best doctors to see if there is something that can be done. Money? Hell, they need research money? I can do that much."

The sweet surge of affection she felt coming from him gave her hope and the strength to continue.

"Oh Alec," she croaked. Tears fell down her face. "You're right. I was terrified. Finally, I was scared enough to finally go to my parents. They took me to doctor after doctor until finally we found a doctor that knew what was wrong with me."

"Give me the basics of what this *Hidra...Hidra*-- shit, help me here," he chuckled.

She could hear the nervousness in his voice. The same sound most people get when they hear about this illness because they never heard of it before. If you say "Cancer" or "Aids", there would be no need for explanations; but, with this, trying to explain the unexplainable was hard. Surviving how people treated you afterwards was even worse.

"We call it HS, because it's easier." She managed a reassuring smile. "Basically, it's a skin disorder, but that is debatable because some doctors believe it's a sweat gland problem. Yet, obviously since there is no cure I'm not sure they know for sure what it is."

"I take it from the scarring I saw on your inner thighs, it can happen in more places than under your arms. Where did they do the skin grafting?" Alec asked.

Mary's eyes grew wide, "You could tell I had a skin graft? Everyone else thought I had a burn scar on my leg."

"I know from experience," he explained. "I was in a motorcycle accident some years back and it took the skin off parts of my leg."

"You mean you're not perfect?" She teased.

"Show me a person who is and I'll show you a liar." Alec grinned. "There is no such thing as perfection, only illusions of perfection."

She was amazed at how easy it was to talk to him about her most intimate secret. Why hadn't he run for the hills yet? Even if he didn't think anyone was perfect, surely he didn't want a woman as scarred as she was. Was he just being a gentleman? Or did it really not

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matter to him?

Mary realized he asked her once again was the grafting under her arms? “For now it’s just one arm. Under my right arm because I had waited so long to get it taken care of.”

Alec nodded and asked, “What else do I need to know about your illness?”

“Well,” Mary heaved a sigh. “I can develop boil-like lesions on the inner thighs, beneath my breast, around my nipples, in the groin area, scalp, neck, vagina, anus. Almost any place that there is hair growing or sweat glands.”

“I see.” He looked away, his brow puckered in deep thought. “Is that it?”

“You need more?” She asked in surprise. “I thought you’d be disgusted from all that you’ve heard so far.”

He shook his head and leaned back in his chair. “I suppose you’re going to always think the worse of me, aren’t you?”

She realized with a wry smile she had unknowingly insulted him again. “I’m sorry. How about I print up some information for you that can answer any questions you may have. I’m not use to speaking about it to anyone that isn’t in the medical field.”

“I understand and I would like that.” He leaned towards her once more. Covering her hand with his, he squeezed. “Mary, I hope you know I’m sincere in my intentions and I want you to know you can depend on me to be here for you. Even if you only want to keep me as a friend, I want you to come to me if you need me to help you get through the pain or cleans locations you can’t reach.”

“Alec,” she murmured in a broken whisper.

Mary could see he was genuine in his offer and she felt overwhelmed by his kindness towards her, yet she silently damned him for giving her hope and desires.

Needing to put as much space as possible between them Mary slid back her chair and stood. Disconcerted, she crossed arms and pointedly looked away. All of her loneliness and confusion fused together in one surge of devouring longing. She wanted to open her heart up to him and allow him to make everything better.

Then again, it was easy for him to be kind when they were alone. What about when they were around his family, friends, and business associates? Would he still feel inclined to be there for her when the cameras were snapping photos for some of the top magazines?

No, she couldn’t let herself get carried away by his current thoughtfulness. Alec Mercer made his living out of knowing how to say the right thing at the right time. Advertising was his life, and he was very good at making a hard sell. Mary was definitely ready to buy what

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he was selling.

“I think I’ll go and get started on some work...” her voice cracked and her temples throbbed.

Before Mary could exit the kitchen, she felt Alec’s strong arms wrap around her entire body from behind. He swooped her against his hard form. “Don’t Mary...don’t shut me out. You don’t have to keep going through your illness in silence and alone.”

“Alec, you don’t know what you’re saying,” she cried.

“I know that I believe I’m falling in love with you and I don’t want to let you walk away from me until you realized you’re aren’t going to get rid of me that easily. I know you may think I’m the shallowest man on earth and I appreciate beauty as much as the next man, but I’ve learned no matter how perfect the wrapping appears to be on the outside, the inside may be from a thrift store.”

Mary laughed and so did he. “Alec, that was bad.”

“Yeah, I know.” He leaned down and placed a kiss to her temple. “I want you Mary, the good and the bad. Give me a chance to prove my sincerity.”

Mary wanted to believe him. What if he ended up resenting her within time? How would a man known for his sexual prowess be able to abstain on those days, she was hurting so badly in her private areas that she wouldn’t be able to wear clothing much less, make love.

“Alec, you don’t have anything to prove to me. In spite of my occasional lack of judgment, I know in my heart you are a decent man. I see it in the respect, admiration, and loyalty of those who have been working for your company for years. Everything I heard had more to do with your bad choices of women, then of you personally.” Mary said. “My HS is more than even I bargained for, I can’t expect you to hold me when I can’t make love to you, or clean and bandaged the lesions I can’t reach, it’s asking too much.”

“Who helps you now?” There was a gentle softness in his voice.

“My parents, mostly.”

“Does it make them love you any less because of it?” he asked.

“Of course not,” she snapped.

“So why do you think a man that loves you would be any less understanding and devoted to your needs?”

Mary had no answer to his question.

“Use me Mary,” Alec whispered frantically against her ear and she tried to break his hold on her, but she couldn’t, and after a moment of futile struggling, she no longer wanted

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to.

"Do you know what you're asking?" She asked weakly. "I'm a burden on my parents, I don't want to become the same to you."

"You've become precious to me, sweetheart. It will be a burden I'm willing to take."

Mary turned in his arms and looked up into his face, searching for any doubts and she didn't see anything but the same sincerity she witnessed earlier. "If you really feel that you can deal with what I have, then there is something I want to ask you to do for me."

"Tell me, I'll do anything within my power." Alec touched her full lips with one finger.

"I want you to be my first lover." Mary blurted out.

Alec's chin dropped and his left eyebrow raised a fraction. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure that I'm attracted to you and I desire you. I'm not looking for commitment or marriage. I want you for your experience." Mary felt her heart pounding in her chest as she awaited his answer.

"All you want from me, is to take your virginity?"

She swallowed audibly and answered his question with a half-truth. "Yes, that's all I want, and then you can go back to your life and I can go back to mine. It will also give us the chance to explore this sexual tension between us"

His hands dropped away and instantly Mary felt deprived of Alec's emotional and physical warmth. His expression was cold as he fixed his eyes on her face.

"I see." He raked a hand through his hair. "You're telling me you want me to take this precious gift from you and afterwards I'm to walk away and move on to the next, whatever?" He finished with a shrug of his shoulders.

Mary put some space between them. At that moment with him standing there before her with arms folded across his chest, she felt as if she was invading his personal space. She felt instant panic, realizing her mistake.

"Forget that I asked. It wasn't my intention to insult you."

"I'm not insulted," Alec said abruptly. "I just expected more, from you."

"Really?" Mary felt resentful of his tone. She felt as if he was judging her. Before she could stop her self she was lashing out. "Just twenty-four hours ago I expected you to be proposing to Erica during the holidays!"

Alec remained silent and she forged ahead.

"Tell me Alec, are you truly ready for a more substantial relationship or are you using me as an excuse not to propose to Erica? Are you capable of being in a serious

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relationship?”

Alec chuckled and it wasn't humorous. Shaking his head, he said, "I'm disappointed in you, Mary."

Her head snapped back as if he'd hit her. She didn't know what she expected, but that wasn't it, "What...what do you mean you're disappointed in *me*?"

"I mean, I would have thought you would have expected more from any man after holding on to your virginity this long with both fist." He released a long breath, crossing his arms over his broad chest. "Why are you so anxious to throw in towel and settle for a casual tryst now?"

Mary licked her dry lips, her stomach fluttered with nervous jitters. "Last night you made me feel things I never felt before and you weren't repulsed by my scars and I felt comfortable being with you."

"So why not make me your first lover," he muttered disdainfully.

"Alec what the hell you want me to say?"

"I don't know if there is anything else you can say Mary." Alec stared at her. "I'm good enough to fuck obviously, but if I suppose anything serious is out of the question. It's not what I expected out of you at all."

"Now you're being an ass!" Mary huffed in frustration. "I suppose I'm making a lot of assumptions here, so tell me what do you expect from me?"

"First, tell me, do you trust me?"

"Would I want to have sex with you if I didn't?"

"That isn't a answer," he pointed out.

"Yes," Mary answered reluctantly. "I trust you."

"With your heart?" His eyes narrowed at her silence. "That's what I thought. I want you to be honest, Mary, if you could have a Christmas wish, what would it be? To lose your virginity without love?"

Mary shook her head her eyes shifted from his face to stare at her hands gripped tightly together.

"Tell me, sweetheart, if you could have one Christmas wish what would it be?" He asked again.

Did she really want to share her hearts desire with him? Maybe she should withdraw her request while she still had some dignity left.

"I wish..." she swallowed deeply. "I wish I would meet a wonderful man that would

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love me to distraction, propose marriage and want to start a family immediately,” she confessed.

She wasn’t surprised that he didn’t have anything to say about her wish.

“You asked.” Mary mumbled. Her shoulders became erect and she raised her head to look him straight in the eyes. “Are you ready for all that, Alec? You see even though I asked you to relieve me of my virginity. I wasn’t stupid enough to believe you wanted anything serious with me, at the end of the day you’re still my boss and I’m still your assistant.”

“Mary,” he said her name softly and reached out for her. “We have more than that going for us. *Dammit*, I--”

She took a step back and held up a hand to keep him at bay. Dolefully his hands dropped back to his sides.

“Don’t say another word, Alec.” Mary interrupted. “I don’t think I can take anymore of this deep conversation this early in the morning. Just forget I even asked you. I’m going to go and get some work done.”

“Sweetheart, don’t shut down now. We need to discuss this. So hear me out and--”

“No, not now.” Mary said bluntly, her eyes burning. “Besides, I only asked because, well you know why, but you can’t even give me a simple “yes” or “no”, so you know what? I’m not interested any more. I don’t want my first time to be pity sex,” she spouted.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“You know for a moment, I thought that giving you my virginity without strings attached would be enough, for you, but in all reality, you’re just looking for a kind way to say thanks, but no thanks.” Mary held her head in her hands. “How could I be so stupid to think you had feelings for me?”

“Do you think I don’t have feelings for you, Mary?” He snapped. “I know you are a virgin but you’re not simple. You asked me to take your virginity because you know that my body can’t fake these erections that plague me whenever you’re near me. You asked me because you know I have feelings for you!”

“I asked you because you’re a very sexual man, we are alone together, and your options are limited,” she stated. Silently she wished she could believe her own words but in truth, she asked him because she was in love with him and she couldn’t imagine her first time being with anyone but Alec.

He released a string of curses, placing his hands on his hips. Looking down at the

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ground he shook his head. “Do you realize what you’re saying? You’re coming up with excuses and arguing with me because you’ve fallen in love with me, haven’t you.”

“Please, step aside, I have a lot to do today.” Mary looked away, he was better at reading her than she thought.

“It can wait,” he declared. “You can deny it if you want, but I know you’re crazy about me, because I’m crazy about you. We have something profound developing between us. I’m not talking about lust, I know lust, this is much more, and I’m not going to stand here and allow you to turn it into something casual because of your insecurities.”

Mary looked him in his eyes, now a beautiful turbulent green, his face was blotched an unattractive red in obvious anger and she still found him to be the most handsome man she’d ever met.

“Take a good look at *me*, Alec. Are you ready to give up life, as you know it? Not only will you have the gawking and stares when we go out together but there is a lot of things I physically couldn’t share with you.”

Mary’s voice arose an octave as she continued in a frantic rant. She needed to make sure Alec knew exactly what he was getting, because she couldn’t bare to chance investing her heart and soul in loving him only for him to tell her one day he made a mistake.

“Sweetheart, Mary, it’s not like this is something that is your fault,” he said splaying his hands wide. “It doesn’t change the fact that I have developed strong feelings for you.”

“Honey,” Mary closed the space between them. “I need you to understand I can’t stay out in the sun for long periods of time. You love going out on your boat and spending your days tanning in the sun in exotic destinations. My body temperature must stay below a certain temperature or I burn from the inside out. So much so that it actually produces heat rashes on my body. Please, understand this. My body is my worse enemy and I don’t want it to become yours.”

“Mary, I’m a ridiculously wealthy man, I have a small yacht, not a boat. It has air conditioning along with the amenities of a four star hotel, including a full staff to cater to your needs and a onboard doctor.” Alec reasoned. “You can come out on deck for as long as you wish, and when you’re feeling overheated go down below and relax.” He grasped her shoulders and squeezed. “When you’re overheated, walk around naked if you want to. I may become overheated,” he teased. “But I won’t complain.”

This time she didn’t move away from his touch. Alec had listened to her, and now she would do the same for him.

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"In addition to the things I love to do in the sun, I also love winter sports and quiet days here, just like we're doing now. As far as our being seen together is concerned, baby, having you on my arm all over town will make me happy. You know why?" He paused. "Because you mean something to *me* and our happiness is all we should be concerned about." He finished by briefly touching her lips with his forefinger before once again dropping his hands to his side.

"Whew Boy," Mary chuckled. "You sure do know how to say all the right things." She covered her face with both hands and shook her head. "Alec, I know you're a good man. I'm ashamed that I asked you to take my virginity for all the wrong reasons. Selfish reasons. How about we start over again and forget that I even asked."

"I don't want to forget any of this, but you're right. We can't become lovers if it isn't for the right reasons. I don't want you to someday look at me and feel as if everything I've said and done since meeting you have been some big seduction on my part," he said. "When you lose your virginity, I want it to be because you are deeply in love with that person, even if it's not me."

She didn't miss his voice faltering on that last statement. Mary bit her lip to stifle the outcry of emotions that threatened to spill forth. She wanted to tell him she asked him because she was deeply in love and had been for the past two years working in his office building. Watching him from a distance, she had learned so much more about him than any tabloid article. He was a kind, honest and sincere man.

Yes, he was also a womanizer, but the one thing Mary had learned, is not one of those women had gone in with their eyes closed. Alec was always very forth coming in the fact that he wasn't looking for a deep relationship or marriage. So she was sure he wouldn't be saying all this to her if he wasn't serious and he also would have not argued this virginity issue if he wanted to have sex with her.

"Thank you," she spoke softly. "You're a good man, Alec Mercer, in spite of your reputation. I will admit that if I was mistaking empathy for something else, I didn't want to make a fool of myself, so I wanted to make it easy for you to take me to your bed and walk away afterwards."

Her voice had fallen barely above a whisper when she spoke causing him to lean down closer. Mary lifted her chin, meeting his warm fixed stare straight on.

"Mary, this isn't empathy, I think I --"

She placed her hand over his mouth, cutting off the words.

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“Shhh, don’t say it. Not now.” She said in a rush of words. “So much has already been said in the past hour. I just told you about my HS and when I shared this secret with other men who thought they wanted to go further with me, they would comfort me and empathize,” she admitted.

After a long pause, during which she struggled with self-control of the painful emotions her confession brought to surface.

“Alec, I mistook their concerns for love, and assumed they would be in my life for the long haul only to never hear from them again.” She touched the side of his face. “It’s too soon for either of us to say the words because once their said, it will change everything. We won’t be able to go back to just being co-workers.”

“So you’re saying if I were to tell you *I love you* at this moment, you wouldn’t believe it even if it was the truth.”

“Exactly.”

Alec released a long sigh and shoved his hands into his pocket. Mary dropped her hand from his face and painted on a happy smile.

“Breakfast was wonderful. Now I really must get the contracts due to be expressed the day after tomorrow finished,” she announced.

“Hey, I thought we were going out.” Alec called out turning to gaze after her as she danced past him.

“Yeah,” she turned on her heels slowly walking backwards, away from him before she changed her mind and went with her urge to kiss him. “You know we did come here to work first, play later. The week will be gone and before you know it, and the house will become full with friends and family. We still have the decorations to get started on. Busy...busy!”

“Do you want to want to kiss me as badly as I want to kiss you right now?” Alec asked aloud what she was thinking.

A mischievous smile was on his face and her stomach did a summersault. Mary released an inward groan as a familiar damp heat spread between her legs. Sweet memories of his fingers delving inside her, his thumb strumming and encircling her clitoris, flooded her thoughts.

“Oh yeah,” she answered him breathlessly.

“We can do it...kiss, I mean,” he offered strolling slowly out of the kitchen towards her. His hands shoved into the pockets of his tight black jeans.

Mary’s eye’s dipped briefly to the bulge between his long muscular thighs. *Damn he is*

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wearing the hell out of those jeans.

“Yes we could.” Mary paused at the foot of the steps. “But I don’t think that would be enough for me right at this moment.”

He grinned. “You say that like it’s a bad thing. We can do a lot of cuddling and fondling like last night. I don’t know about you but I work better when I’m not this tense.”

“Well, I work well under pressure, so I will see you around lunch time!” Mary was amazed at how quickly she could run up a flight of stairs. She was well aware Alec was taking full advantage of the view he was getting from the bottom of the stairs.

“Mary,” he called out.

She paused and turned as she reached the landing. She felt like Juliet from the Shakespearean play, *Romeo and Juliet*.

“Yes?”

“While you’re working I will start bringing the decorations down from the attic.”

“Okay.” She took a step towards her room.

“And Mary,” he called out again.

She stopped and turned once more. “Yes, Alec?” She lifted an inquiring eyebrow.

“Lady, you’re putting me on a slow burn for the rest of the day and I’m not complaining, but you better be ready to suffer the consequences.”

“Consequences?” She cocked her head to the side a slight frown puckered her brow.

“Yep, later this evening we will be doing some cuddling and kissing or my name ain’t Alec Mercer. So you better start getting accustomed to the idea.”

Alec shoved his hand in his pocket fingering the diamond engagement ring that had once belonged to his grandmother, his mind racing, trying to align his influences. He figured that once he convinced Mary he was sincere in his pursuit, he would tell her how he felt, but he needed to show her first. Despite her protest he knew she was interested or she would never had considered him to be her first lover and if he could help it, her last.

He opened up the safe in the library and placed the ring back inside. Alec decided it would be best to start by allowing her to set the pace. To give her time to get use to his company, his kisses and touches until she craved them as much as he did her lips, her body. Finally, he had found the right woman and now he had to find the right time to ask her to marry him and prayed she’d believe him once he confessed his feelings.

Mary would be concerned about her family and friends, not to mention the fact that he

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was her boss. Would she continue to work with him? Being his wife if she didn't want to work at all he would understand, but what if she was as concerned about his infidelity as Erica had been when she insisted that he hire a less attractive assistant? Hell, Mary was already feeling insecure about them being seen as a couple, she may want to hand pick his assistant.

Alec grinned at the thoughts of Mary being possessive of him. He'd never been a possessive man but the thought of Mary being with another man made his eyes cross with jealousy. He wanted to teach her all about the pleasures of the flesh, while she helped him to have the loving and nurturing marriage like his parents.

In the past he was the one that had planned to make his career his entire life. He had never planned on marrying, that was his brother's dream. He wanted the wife, lots of children and a home he built with his own two hands. Now that he was gone, the legacy of his family was left up to him to carry on and as his mother pushed, the more of a burden he found it to be.

That first night he spent time with Mary in her small townhouse, he felt more at home than he did in his own penthouse apartment towering over the city. The ease in which she teased him while encouraging him to try new Chinese dishes, feeding him samples using *her* chopsticks, and without hesitation to the fact he was a near stranger she used the same chopsticks to finish her meal. It was their first indirect kiss and she was too innocent to realize the impact her natural sensuality had on him.

Alec felt a familiar hardening in his crotch. He shook his head, pushing away all thoughts of sexing Mary. He needed to remain focused on the objective. He had a week alone with her before his family and possibly hers, invaded. If he hadn't made any leeway before then, he might as well hold off on proposing until after the holidays. Still, he wanted to go into the New Year knowing Mary was going to be a part of his future.

His sweet unpretentious Mary had legitimate health concerns. How was he to make her understand that it didn't matter to him? He loved her for who she was and all the things that came with her, so her concerns were now his concerns.

Alec took a seat behind his desk and opened his laptop computer. After several times searching for a disease he couldn't spell, he found what he was looking for and settled in to learn as much as he could about Hidradenitis Suppurativa.

Moments later with tears in his eyes and a grim look on his face he shut his computer off, but he couldn't blot out the pictures of the damage HS could do. Mary's current case

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must be contained in comparison to some of the others with this illness, not to say within time hers won't progress.

Alec did what he always did when he needed sound advice. He picked up the phone and placed a call to his Dad.

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CHAPTER NINE

The door opened with only a brief knock just as Mary had finished putting on her yellow silk nightgown, a brush poised to do her nightly one hundred strokes. It was Alec and he didn't look happy.

"What are you doing in my room? You didn't even knock."

"I did so knock."

"Barely."

"What's going on? You didn't come down for lunch, you didn't come down for dinner, and you barely touched the tray George brought up to you."

"I'm a grown woman, Alec, I can fend for myself." Mary put the brush on the dresser and moved to the bed to put on the matching robe. I didn't have much of an appetite and I've been busy. All the new contracts are completed and you can fax them at any time."

"Trust me, I can see you're a grown woman and in all the right places."

His voice, deep and sensual, sent a ripple of awareness through her. Mary pulled the robe close and tied the sash at the waist, stopping short at smiling over his obvious disappointment.

"You finished a weeks worth of work in one day?"

"If I'm going to go home and spend Christmas with my family, I figured the sooner I was done the more time I would have for other things, such as decorating. Now we can spend tomorrow on decorating."

"We won't be decorating tomorrow," Alec stated. "We, have plans."

Mary arched a brow. "More business?"

"No, but--"

"I'll stay here and get started and you can go and take care of whatever plans you have," Mary reasoned.

Alec rubbed his right temple. Mary didn't mean to upset him, but her emotions were all over the place. She felt a longing so deep it almost doubled her over from the pain. She

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wanted Alec and most of all she wanted to be sure he wanted her. How was she suppose to know what was truth and what wasn't. She's been a fool before, but was it fair to place Alec in the same group with the other men that had disappointed her?

Mary had her doubts about Alec, how could she not? He made having sex and letting go of his assistants after they became clingy and demanding. He had done it so often, his employees began placing bets on how long it would take him to get the assistant in his bed and how long would she last after. After they return to the office and their relationship became public, she would become the laughing stock of the office until she would have no choice but to quit.

Did she really want to alienate the friendships she'd developed with her co-workers, for the possibility that he loved her? Could she trust him to be the same Alec back home that he was here when they were practically alone?

"Why are you staring at me like that?" He broke into her thoughts and she turned away from his questioning wonder.

"Was I? I didn't mean to stare." She released a long breath. "I was thinking about something."

"Some *thing*, or me?"

"A little of both."

"Mary, about tomorrow." Alec moved forward. "I want you to spend the day with me."

She saw he was actually shifting from foot to foot as he awaited her answer. He looked so adorable standing there. She didn't think she'd ever seen him so nervous before. How could she turn him down now? She couldn't.

"What time do I need to be ready?"

His face split into a wide breathtaking smile, making her happy she agreed.

"About eight," he answered. "Make sure you dress comfortable and warm."

"I'll be ready."

"Thank you, Mary."

"You're welcome."

"Uh...don't eat breakfast, we'll get something while we're out," he said.

"Sounds great."

Mary thought he would leave, but he seemed to have something more on his mind. She wanted very badly for him to stay with her tonight. Just to feel his arms around her as she slept, would be enough. She didn't look forward to the sleepless night she knew was to

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come.

Alec came up behind her and grasped her shoulders. Mary stared at their reflection in the mirror as his dark head bent and nuzzled the side of her neck.

“Sweet Mary, you smell of mangos and all I can do is wonder what other places on you that carry this scent. Is it a bath gel or is it lotion? Do you rub it all over or in certain areas such as your neck,” he murmured breathing a kiss there. “Here on your shoulder?”

His deep husky voice caused a warmth to spread from her tingling nipples to her throbbing clitoris.

“Alec--” Mary licked her lips, her breath coming in tiny puffs.

“Mary” he interrupted. “You can hate me for this later,” he murmured. “But please, don’t stop me now. Let me touch you for a moment.”

She didn’t think she could stop him now even if she wanted to. She’d spent the entire day working alone, with thoughts of him distracting her to the point of madness. Anything he wanted to do to her now that he had come to her, she was a willing participant, damning all the negatives that may come afterwards.

Mary drank in the comfort of his nearness, caught up entirely by her own emotions. Their intertwined reflection in the mirror with their masculine and feminine contrast along with the paleness of his fingers on her dark skin pushing the yellow satin robe off her shoulders.

He tugged her closer until the back of her body leaned into his. His hands roamed her body, caressing and teasing.

She felt extraordinarily...extraordinary. Slight undercurrents of delight coursed through her everywhere Alec touched, followed by little quivers of anticipation. When his hand slid up into her hair to tug gently, she let her head tilt to the side and turned slightly in his arms, her eyes opened heavy lidded watching his lips lower to hers. What started out as a leisurely kiss suddenly turned into an expedition for gratification.

Breaking the kiss Alec breathed against her mouth, “I need you.”

“Now, please,” she exhaled with relief. She was so sure she was ready, her entire body vibrated with reckless desire.

“Mary,” he kissed her once more.

“Yes...oh yes...” she turned in his arms until she was facing him. He had such a beautifully exquisite mouth.

“Do you feel as if your entire body is about to go into flames? Do you have an ache

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deep inside making you feel needy and lonely?

“God, yesss,” she moaned against his lips.

“Good.”

Stunned Mary pulled her head back to look up at him.

“You knew you left me on slow burn this morning and I spent the entire day yearning to see your smile, hear your laughter, taste your lips, and hold you in my arms just like this.”

Mary blushed. She had been caught, but it wasn't a womanly ploy on her part as much as it was fear that she might not be as ready as she thought she was to become more intimate with Alec. Yet, now she realized how childish she was being, because the minute he touched her all the doubts she may have had, disappeared.

His long fingers comb through her hair as he held her face in his hands. Pressing a tender kiss her mouth once again, he pulled away and said with a grin, “One of the things I adore about you Mary is your honesty and the fact that you don't play games that other women like to play. Today felt like you were playing one of those games.”

“I'm sorry.” She licked her lips. “The more I thought about cuddling and kissing you the more frightened I became from the expectation alone.”

“I see.” His eyebrow lifted with his inquiry. “Are you frightened now?”

“No, you didn't give me time to think about it.”

“I'll remember next time not to give you any fair warnings,” he winked at her. “See you bright and early in the morning, sweet Mary.”

Without another word, just like that, he turned on his heels, and strode out of the bedroom.

Mary knees trembled. She set on the bed touching her tingling mouth with her fingertips.

“Damn.”

After another restless night with visions of Mary dancing in his head, Alec was aware of unrequited tension in his muscles. He felt growing excitement awaiting her to walk through the door of the media room.

After her heated response to his kisses the night before he was more determined to make Mary his. After confiding in his parents that he had found someone he was serious about, to the delight of his mother, she was forthcoming with suggestions and good advice. Starting with showing Mary his true self. The parts of him he kept hidden from public consumption.

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“Alec?”

He turned at the sound of her voice and smiled. Mary had on jeans and a peach cashmere sweater, her shoulder length hair was in girlish two girlish pigtails, a delightful change from her bun, single ponytail, or twisted atop her head.

He appreciated her natural beauty. She didn't use layers of cosmetics to give the illusion of prettiness. She didn't have to. Alec couldn't recollect all the times his bed pillows were ruined by messy streaks and smears left from models that refused to be seen in the all natural. With their makeup rubbed off on his pillow, leaving their faces bare to scrutiny, often he felt as if he went to bed with one woman and woke up with another.

With Mary, he knew exactly what he was getting and he knew that every morning when he woke up next to her, she would look at him the way she was looking at him now with those beautiful expressive eyes.

She thought she could hide behind her glasses all her emotions and feelings, but it was far from true, for they actually magnified her expression and without them, the vulnerability and mistrust he saw in them nearly unmanned him.

He knew Mary wanted him physically, but lust wasn't a lasting emotion. What Alec needed was for Mary to stop over-thinking the situation and listen to what her heart was telling her. If not, he knew she would regret making love to him afterwards. If she hadn't been a virgin he probably would have gave in to his sexual prowess to increase their emotional bond. Logically, she couldn't get past the fact that he was a man known for being the best one-night-stand a woman could have, single or married. He hadn't been picky.

He didn't blame her for her doubts. He deserved it because it never occurred to him during his escapades that he would fall in love with a woman who morals were so different from his own.

“Morning, am I late?” Mary asked.

Her hands worked at the hemline of her sweater as she fidgeted. Alec shook his head realizing he was gawking like a fresh face schoolboy with his first crush, obviously making her uncomfortable in the process.

“Uh, no. I was just thinking how lovely you look this morning. I like that peach color on you. It compliments your beautiful brown skin.”

Mary blushed prettily. “Thank you. I hoped it was okay. You did say to dress comfortable and warm...” her voice trailed off into a smile.

He took in her short slightly spaced teeth and perfect plump heart-shaped mouth and

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longed to waltz over to her until they were breathless like the night before. It took more will power than he thought he possessed to walk out of the bedroom and leave her alone.

“Alec, are these boots okay? I may be too casual. You didn’t say where we were going.” Mary looked down at herself, her ponytails brushing forward over her cheeks.

Alec found her totally adorable. How could she be so unaware of her own appeal? She made him feel hopeful and excited about the future. Since his brother died he’d been in the reckless spiral to have every thrill imaginable, because life was too short. It took his mother pointing out that his current behavior could cause his life to be shorter than necessary and she had no intentions of losing both of her sons to foolish nonsense.

He absently wondered if his slowing down at his mother’s request and starting to think about marriage is what allowed him to see what has been right in front of his eyes all along. Mary. If so, he had a lot to thank his mother for. Never had he felt this way and it felt damn good. More freeing than climbing mountains, deep sea diving and jumping out of planes, pulling the shoot at the last possible minute.

Being in love had made him feel more alive than any thrill seeking adventure he partook in these past few years.

Alec smiled at Mary and said, “Mary, every time I look at you I discover something new that I hadn’t notice before.”

“Really, it’s my hair, isn’t it?” Her hands flew up to her head. “These ponytails look silly on a thirty-two year old woman, don’t they? If you wait just a moment I can--”

“Baby, you look wonderful so stop fidgeting.” He chuckled moving forward to take her hand and bring it up to his lips. “I love your hair, I love your smile, and I love what you’re wearing. Most of all I love the anticipation I feel when I’m watching you. Do you have any idea how many different expressions, I’ve seen on your beautiful face?”

“Now I know you didn’t get much sleep, you called me beautiful,” Mary mumbled.

He felt he tugging to get her hand loose from his, but he kept his hold on her grasping her other hand by the wrist forcing her to face him. He pulled her against him holding her arms pinned behind her back while his eyes looked deeply in to hers.

“God, you are truly oblivious to how lovely you are, aren’t you?” Alec shook his head in disbelief. “Let me speak from my vast experience with beautiful women. Mary, you are the first woman to still my breath away with your smile.” He saw a cloud of doubt come over her features and said, “I know what you’re thinking, but before you start doubting what I’m saying to you, look at me Mary. Look into my eyes. Do you think I’m lying to you?”

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Does the reaction my body has to yours when I'm holding you lie to you?"

He held still, his erection pressing hard into her upper stomach as her head arched back to look up at him and search his face. He didn't know what to expect, but the shimmering of tears in her eyes wasn't one of them. He softened his hold not wanting her to feel he was exerting his strength to keep her in his arms.

"Alec, when you speak to me this way, I can't think reasonably."

"Don't think, Mary, do what I'm doing. Go with your feelings." He bent his head and before placing his lips over hers, he murmured, "I adore your mouth."

"And I like the way your mouth feels against mine," she murmured back.

Pleasantly surprised at her admittance, he forged ahead. Settling his mouth over hers until they molded together perfectly, in spite of their height difference their bodies seemed to fit in all the right places.

Alec inserted his tongue into her mouth, deeply and she reciprocated. Releasing her wrist he grasped her jean clad bottom and lifted her against him. Mary gasped in surprise and pulled back to look at him.

"Alec, I...I'm too heavy." Mary protested. "Please, put me down before you hurt yourself, Boy!"

"Does it feel like I'm going to drop you?"

"No, it feels wonderful. You know, no one has ever picked me up like this before," she said softly, a lone tear rolled over her cheek. "I suppose it's because of my size. I often had nightmares of my husband trying to lift me up and carry me over the threshold and it would become this horrible comedy spoof. I never imagined any man would be able to lift me up in his arms like this."

"I'm made of sturdy stuff woman," he spoke in a soothing voice. "I will hold you like this as long as you let me."

"You promise?"

"On my life."

Mary pressed her lips to his and Alec held on to her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his hips. He knew being between her round thighs would be heaven, but he would have enjoyed it more if there were no clothing between them.

He pulled his head back and rested his forehead against hers. The air blew hot between them as they fought to regain some semblance of control. Her dark hair swept forward clinging to the roughness of his unshaved face. Once Alec broke the kiss he saw the redness

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he left around her mouth, a sure tell sign of what they'd been up to. It would soon fade but for now he took pleasure in leaving his mark upon her.

"What are you thinking?" Mary asked.

"I'm thinking that I would like nothing better than to move you over to the sofa and kiss you until we don't know where my lips start and yours end."

"I'm game," she gave him an inviting grin that almost made him give in, but he had made plans and it was important that they arrived on time.

"No can do sweetheart, we are expected for breakfast and if we don't leave now we'll be late."

Mary groaned her disappointment as he eased her down his body until her feet touched the ground.

Alec removed the remote key from his pocket pressing the button to start the car so it could start warming up.

"Well it's a good thing we are going outside," she commented grinning up at him. "I think the frigid air will do us some good."

"Amen." Alec agreed returning her smile with one of his own. He held her coat for her as she slid her arms inside. She turned towards him and he wrapped the matching soft scarf around her neck, pulling her in for another kiss before spinning her towards the door with a playful slap to her ample rear. "Get, before I change my mind about going out today."

"Ouch," she rubbed her bottom and licked her tongue at him before taking off out of the media room towards the front door.

Alec chuckled at her girlish giggles. He enjoyed this feeling of playful happiness that swept through him. He shoved his arms in his coat and followed her out the door. Before he pulled the front door shut a clump of snow hit him in the side of the face.

"What!" He sputtered snow out of his mouth with a laugh seeing Mary standing beside the SUV with a big grin on her face. "What you do that for?"

"I figured you needed help coolin' off," she yelled at him over the idling engine.

"You better be glad I don't have time to get you wetter then you already are, or I would give you a snowball fight you'd never forget."

"I'm not wet--"

Alec caught her eyes and winked with a wicked grin making it clear he wasn't talking about "water" wet. From her open mouth stare the pun hadn't been lost on her. Before she could say another word. He rushed her and kissed her surprised open mouth before opening

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the car door for her to step up inside. Jogging around to the other side, he hopped in. Finally they were off, and not a minute too late. His heart felt light and he was looking forward to the rest of their day together.

“*Now* can you tell me where we are going?” Mary spoke breaking the companionable silence.

Alec steered off the Mercer Ranch onto the main road towards town. “I’m taking you to meet someone very special to me. You’re in for a treat because she’s cooking up a big breakfast, just for us.” Alec said.

“I see,” Mary said softly. “It’s nice of *her* to invite me too. Does she live up here?”

“It’s about a thirty minute drive depending on the roads leading down the mountain and the traffic on the two-lane road leading into Leavenworth.”

“Has she lived in Leavenworth long?”

“Before we built the mountain holiday home, we’d spend the holidays with her. We use to go up to the mountain to ski and stumbled upon the property the ranch is on for sale,” he supplied.

“It sounds as if you’ve known this woman for a long time.” Mary spoke so softly he had to lean to the side to hear her.

“All my life.” Alec answered with a smile.

Mary quietly nodded and looked at her hands in her lap.

After they drove another mile or two Alec became aware that Mary had become very still focusing all her attention on the scenic view outside the window. Her brow was puckered as if something was bothering her.

Figuring she would tell him in her own good time, he decided to leave her to her thoughts. He reached over to turn on the radio and let the cheerful melodies of Christmas soothe the harshness of the growing silence.

“Oh, Alec this place is lovely. It looks as if we’re in one of those small village towns in Europe!”

He felt such relief at her growing excitement upon entering the quaint little town. He was beginning to wonder if he had said something to upset her.

“Welcome to Leavenworth, Washington. The architecture here was structured after a Bavarian Village. They have wonderful gift shops and festivities all year around.” Alec explained.

“Will we have time to stop and look in the shops?” Mary asked.

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"We have all day, my sweet." He reached across the seat where her hand rested and squeezed it briefly before returning to the steering wheel to make a right turn.

"So how much further to this...*woman's*...place that you mentioned?" She cocked her head to the side in question.

"We're here." Alec announced as he turned on his blinker and right turned once more onto a pebble-stone driveway partly covered in a light dusting of snow.

Alec steered and parked beside an antique aqua-green 1957 Chevy. To his surprise, before he could get out of the car to open the door for Mary, she'd let herself out and was standing staring with wide-eyed delight at the bright pink cottage house.

"This, is your friend's home?" Mary asked reading the hanging wooden sign alighted with Christmas lights. *Ladybird Cottage*. "What is this place?"

Alec beamed and announced, "My home away from home."

"It's absolutely lovely!" She laughed and touched the white picket fence that surrounded the walkway leading up to the front door.

"Yup, a lot of great memories were created here for me and my brother. Especially during the summers."

"Really? I bet it's even more beautiful in the spring and summer. I can imagine beautiful arrays of flowers all about the courtyard." Mary turned her wide smile on him and immediately he felt warmth spread over him.

"Yes. We sat on that porch swing right there sipping the best lemonade you've ever tasted." Alec swung open the white gate for Mary to enter first. He felt excitement bubbling in the pit of his stomach. He couldn't wait to introduce her to the woman waiting inside.

Reaching out his hand he linked his fingers with hers. She looked hesitant for a moment before she fell in step beside him. He laughed at Mary's chuckle when she heard the chimes of bells playing the *Sound of Music*, from the movie with the same title as Alec pushed open the door. With his hand resting comfortably in the small of her back, he ushered her inside.

"She's a big fan of the movie," he whispered.

"I like that movie too, I sing along every time I watch it," Mary blurted out.

"Then you'll fit in nicely with this family, young lady." A soft motherly voice with a heavy unfamiliar accent spoke, announcing her entrance.

The elderly woman ambled forth with a wide grin, her fleshy arms opened wide in welcome to Alec who swept her short stout figure off her feet and twirled her around placing a big wet kiss on her cheek.

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"It's a shame I only see you during the holidays, Al. While I have to put up with that mother of yours visiting and telling me she is going to move me to Seattle to live with them." She patted his shoulders making him lower her to the ground. "Just because I'm old, I will not be bullied."

"That's because we worry about you being here alone, Mummo."

"The deal is you give me some great grandbabies and I'll give up the bed and breakfast to help out with the babies, but you know I need to keep busy. There will be time enough for resting when I'm dead."

Alec scowled. "Don't speak like that, Mummo, you will surely outlive us all."

"From your mouth to God's ears. Now enough of our rudeness, who is this lovely girl, you brought to see me?"

"I'm sorry." Alec grabbed Mary's hand and tugged her forward placing her hand in his grandmother's hand. "Mary, I want you to meet my grandmother, Ava Zhender."

"Nice, to meet you, Mrs. Zhender." Mary embraced the woman in return as she wrapped her arms about her in a hug. "Thank you for having me here. You have a lovely home. The Victorian décor is exactly what I expected when I walked through the door. It feels as if I stepped back in time."

"No...no Mrs. Zhender, child, call me Mummo, like my darling, Al." The older woman patted Mary's hand and held it in hers.

Taking hold of Alec's hand with the other one she lead them further into the sitting room, a wide smile on her rouged lips.

"Mary, these are furnishings that were brought over from Europe by my parents. I hoped to leave all of this to Al, but he has no need of such things. Except for the sentimental value, I wouldn't know why he would want to keep them."

"Sentimental value is priceless," Mary spoke up. "Anyone can see the history and love that you have placed in this home." She smiled and gently squeezed Mummo's hand. "I can't imagine the furnishings being in a more perfect place then right here. Hopefully, this is something you and Alec won't have to worry about for a long time."

"Oh, you are a dear. I'm so happy Al, brought you here to visit me." She chuckled warmly and her cherub face broke into a grin as her green eyes twinkled like a child with a secret. "Come...come, little ones, get those coats off, and hang them over there to dry, Al. I hope the both of you are hungry because breakfast is nearly ready. The other guests should be down shortly."

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“Other guest?” Mary asked looking at Alec over his grandmother’s head.

“After my grandfather passed away Mummo turned the place into a Bed and Breakfast. She provides, breakfast and tea with her famous scones late in the afternoon to all the guest that are in house.” He explained. “How many are currently in residence, Mummo?”

“There is this sweet newlywed couple, along with a salesman that’s just passing through. We practically have the place to ourselves.” Ava tugged them both closer so that she could whisper in a conspirator’s voice, “The Salesman is an old Scrooge, no personality at all. If we’re lucky, he will skip breakfast as he has for the past two mornings he’s been here. Tonight will be his last night and he will be checking out at noon tomorrow. Thank God.”

“Mummo, why didn’t you turn him away, it’s not like you need his money. You do this to stay busy and you definitely don’t have to put up with any inconsiderate bastard,” Alec stated.

“I know...I know...but, what kind of person would I be if I turned a soul away, especially around Christmas, just because I don’t like his behavior. Maybe that’s why he’s the way he is,” Mummo reasoned. “The man expects people to behave badly towards him, so he beats them to the punch I suppose.”

“I still don’t like you’re doing this, these days. It’s dangerous.” Alec pointed out.

“Getting in my Chevy is dangerous, but you think that’s going to stop me from driving? Now stop fretting, son” She waved his concern aside and changed the subject. “I hope you two brought an overnight bag, so you can stay for the festivities tonight at Front Street Park.”

“No, Mummo. Mary and I are just here for the day.”

“Nonsense, I insist you stay for the Starlight Lantern Parade. Mary, dear, do you bake?”

“Yes, I love cooking,” Mary piped in nodding her head.

“Oh marvelous, you can help me to make cookies to take over to the Nazarene Church. We will be serving free cookies and hot chocolate to those who are coming to see the live nativity scene.”

“Mummo, we won’t be able to stay until dark. When night falls, it may be impossible to make it back up to the house.” Alec tried to reason not wanting to put Mary on the spot.

“Al, I hear what you’re saying, but what does Mary have to say?” Ava paused and looked over to Mary. “This is her first time here and it’s her vacation isn’t it? Allow her to have some fun.”

Mary shrugged, looking up at Alec. “Well, it does sound like fun and with all the work I’ve been doing, maybe this will help it to feel more like it’s Christmas. Couldn’t we stay the

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night? Can't we go and see if we can find what we need to get us through the night at one of the shops?"

Alec looked at her in surprise. He felt warmth deep inside at her use of the word "we".

"You really don't mind staying the night?" He asked looking her straight in the eyes to make sure. He knew how kind hearted Mary was and he didn't want her saying yes just because his grandmother was standing here.

"You heard the girl the first time, because I did, Al." His grandmother clucked her tongue and tugged at both of them "Come, I see the newlyweds are late as usual, maybe they will take a breather and join us...eventually." Ava smiled and winked at Mary who laughed at her obvious meaning.

"I don't know if I would be worried about food if I was honeymooning," Alec mumbled, his inviting green eyes on Mary.

She reddened and looked away, nearly walking into Ava as she stopped abruptly at the dining room entrance.

"Mr. Hammonds, to what do we owe the honor of your presence at the breakfast table this morning?" Ave asked. "Alec, Mary, this is Mr. Hammonds, a traveling salesman from Wichita."

Alec barely nodded at the man, while Mary spoke a soft "good morning".

"I'm paying to eat, ain't I? I saw you blushing gal," he eyed Mary from head to toe with an insolent stare. "I do believe that's the first time I saw a black person turn red. I didn't even think such a thing was possible." The harsh voice that greeted them in the dining room caught them all by surprised.

"Why you son-of-a--," Alec stepped forward halting as Mary grabbed his arm and shook her head.

"Mr. Hammonds, I know you are a paying guest but this is *my* home. I will not have you being rude to anyone else in my home," Ava spoke up.

"Oh really now." The man's eyes narrowed on Ava. "It's bad enough I had to put up with the *Chinaman* and White woman couple every time I came down to breakfast, now this. It makes me sick to my stomach what the world is coming to today." He commented to Ava nodding his head towards Alec and Mary. "Do the good townspeople know what kind of establishment you're running here lady? You let all sorts in here, it's plumb sickening."

"Don't speak to my grandmother that way!" Alec barked, still feeling Mary's hand on his arm.

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“Hey, don’t I know you from somewhere? Are you one of them actors or something? I swear I’ve seen you in magazines.”

“I wouldn’t think a Neanderthal such as yourself would pick up a magazine.” Alec said reigning in his building anger as he felt Mary quietly simmering beside him. “What do you do? Look at the pretty pictures?”

The older man leered at Alec and shouted, “I know who you are now. You’re that millionaire advertising executive, Alec Mercer. Well, well, aren’t you the one that I always see with those supermodels and socialites?” He chuckled. “Hell, this is a photo opportunity I’m sure the tabloids would love to have. You in some romantic hideaway with this short, fat, black--”

Before he could complete his sentence Alec lifted the man out of his seat at the dining room table by the lapels of his tweed jacket.

“Alec, no!” Mary and Ava spoke at the same time.

“Consider yourself lucky Hammonds, that ladies are present and this is my grandmother’s home. It’s the only reason you will be allowed to pack up your stuff and leave this house unmarred.” Alec’s tone was deep and menacing removing any doubts about his seriousness.

“Go ahead do your worse,” the older man growled. “You and your granny will have one helluv’ a lawsuit on your hands.”

“Do your worse and I promise you I will dig so deep into your life and past you will need a shovel to dig your way out of the red-tape shit I can heap on you. I have friends. Tell me when was the last time you were audited, Hammonds?”

“You...you can’t do that?”

“Try me,” Alec countered. “You have ten minutes to get your stuff and get out. I will personally refund the cost of your stay here.”

“Mercer, you don’t scare me,” Hammonds argued.

“I make things happen,” Alec leered. “Trust me you do not want me as an enemy, sir. Mummo, why don’t you call the Sheriff? I’m sure he will be happy to give your guest a place to spend his last night, courtesy of the Leavenworth jailhouse. Either way you’re getting the hell out of here, right now.”

The man straightened his jacket and without another word stormed out of the dining area with Alec on his heels just in case the man needed help finding the door.

CHAPTER TEN

Mary looked at Alec's grandmother and smiled timidly. "Are you okay, you look a little pale."

"I'll be fine. I'm just not use to that kind of behavior. I hope this doesn't affect your decision to spend the night and join us in the festivities."

"Of course not." Mary assured her. "I just wished Alec hadn't overreacted. Ignorance comes from all sources and violence begets violence. Besides, the moment he recognized Alec he probably saw dollar signs and wanted him to hit him, just so he could sue."

"Sad, but true." Ava agreed. "Do this sort of bigotry happen to you and my grandson often?"

Stunned by what she was suggesting, Mary hurriedly shook her head in denial. "Oh, no, it's not what you're thinking. Alec and I are co-workers and friends...well, my boss. I'm just here to help him get caught up on some contracts."

"I see." Ava smiled a closed lipped smile. "So how long have you been in love with, Al?"

"I'm not--," Mary started to deny her feelings, but the look Ava gave her let her know that she wasn't fooling her. "I fell in love with him the moment I saw him. When I was hired on at Mercer a little before Halloween a few years ago, I was dressed up in costume and handing out baked goods to the office. I saw him sitting in his office through his open door. His face was deep in thought as he looked out his office door. For a moment his eyes met mine, just a glance really, and I was a goner. He's the most beautiful man I think I've ever seen that wasn't on television," Mary confessed her face flushed with emotions.

"Have you told Alec how you feel?"

For a moment, Mary felt horrified by the thought. "He knows I'm attracted to him, but I don't believe I have the nerve to tell him the extent of my feelings and I don't dare hope that their could actually be something serious going on between us."

Ava crossed her arms over her ample breast and leaned her hip against the entranceway

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of the door leading into what look to be the kitchen area. "May I ask why not? Surely you don't have an issue with your races being different, do you?"

"No," Mary shook her head. "Well maybe a little, but not enough to keep me from loving him." She shrugged her shoulders, her arms dropping to her sides. She found it strange to be confessing all to Alec's grandmother, before she told Alec how she really felt about him.

"I see that I'm making you uncomfortable with my curiosity, but don't be, dear. I'm a woman and I've been around a long time. Sometimes others see things before the parties involved do," Ava said in a soothing voice.

"No, I needed to speak to someone about all these emotions." Mary gave the other woman a thankful smile. "I normally would have called my mother, but I didn't want her to get her hopes up. She always get overly excited when I bring up a man," she rolled her eyes and chuckled. "Grandbabies and all that, you know?"

"Trust me I know because I, and my daughter, Al's mother, are both guilty of doing the same thing." Ava laughed. "Let me ease your mind by telling you what I see."

"I'd like that, because my emotions and thoughts are all over the place."

"Well Mary, I saw the way my grandson came to your defense, but then that is Alec, he has the heart of a protector. It's why he dwindled into helplessness so long after his brother died--"

"I know. I couldn't believe he felt guilty for being alive, while his brother had died in the war. I--" Mary's mouth slammed shut when she saw the surprise on Ava's face. "I'm sorry..."

"No," Ava waved a hand at her, her hazel eyes shiny with tears. "I...I'm actually happy because I always suspected as much, but none of us could get Al to even talk about his brother."

"Now I really feel bad for saying anything, because Alec may have preferred I kept his confidence to myself," Mary fretted.

Ava reached out and patted her shoulders. "Then it will be our little secret. This also confirms what I am seeing between you two."

Mary shook her head. A blush of heat swept of the sides of her neck.

"Tis true. When you aren't looking at Alec, his eyes follow your movements and there is this unconscious grin around his mouth. He is falling in love with you Mary if he hasn't already, and I for one could not be more pleased. Al needs a nice girl such as yourself that

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can get to know and accept him for who he is, not this publicity hound that we see on television and such.”

“Yeah, I’m learning that that man and the one I’m coming to know are not the same.”

“I’ve seen him in newspapers with one girl after another and not one of them was his type. Al has always had a thing for the big girls, like his Mummo and Mama. We are of sturdy European peasant stock and I never understood why he continuously insisted on dating those stick figured women!”

Mary was relieved to see the moment of sadness gone from the elderly woman’s face. Her eyes alight with the warmth of earlier as she continued chatting about Alec. Mary was delighted she had someone to share her feelings with. Most of all she liked Alec’s grandmother immensely.

“When Alec introduced you to them did you have this need to fatten them up for his sake?” Mary teasingly asked, not expecting the answer she received.

“Sweetheart, Al doesn’t mind parading those women around in public, but he would never bring any of them around his family unless he was serious. Especially around me! He knows I will bluntly speak my mind in regards to his choices.” Ava’s double chin lifted a notch. “No, no, he never bring them gold-diggers around me,” she huffed.

“You’re saying you haven’t met not one of the women Alec has been linked to “seriously” be dating?” Mary chin dropped in disbelief. “Not even, Erica Fontaine? I believe he planned on proposing to her, this holiday.”

“Miss Fontaine?” She touched a finger to her chin in thought. “Hmm...I believe my daughter, Nessa, Alec’s mother, has met her. She didn’t care much for her from my understanding. She said the woman didn’t seem to have a sincere bone in her body, but no, she hasn’t been in this house.”

“So, you’re saying, none of the other assistants that had accompanied him during the week before the family arrived has visited--”

Mary halted, seeing how, Ava was already shaking her head. Stunned by the implications of what Ava was saying she stared in silence at Alec’s grandmother. Her hair white and thinning with age was sprayed into a becoming short matronly style off her broad brow, tapering along her neckline. If she had to choose someone that Alec’s grandmother resembled, she would have to say Barbara Bush, only shorter. It was her expressive eyes that drew one’s attention the most.

Mary shook off her musings as she realized Ava was speaking to her. “I’m sorry, what

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did you say?"

"Dear, I said *you* are the only woman that Al has brought to his childhood home to meet me." Ava patted her cheek and released a throaty snort. "I see that stunned look on your face. You might as well get use to the idea that my grandson is in love with you, even if he may not realize it yet. With that said, I need a you to do me a favor."

"If I can," Mary said, still numb by the knowledge that Alec had been serious about everything he'd said to her. He didn't say it because he felt sorry for her. It was becoming reasonably obvious that he really did have feelings for her.

"If my Alec, does tell you he loves you, trust that it is true because no matter how active he's been I know my grandson does not throw these words around casually. I suppose what I'm saying is if you love him, then tell him. Life is too short to leave things to chance."

Mary nodded in understanding.

"Also, if for some reason you can't see yourself returning Al's affections let him know soon, before he comes to care anymore for you than he already does."

"I have no desire to hurt Alec," Mary assured her.

Ave smiled at her. "Of course not, but sometimes it happens. Regardless of what you have read or heard about Al, he is an artist at heart...a sensitive soul. Though he puts up a brave front."

"I've seen his art work. I was very disappointed, when I heard Rubenesque had retired, about twelve years ago. I'm still trying to get use to Alec and the artist being one and the same."

"Forgive me dear I'm being rude again. While we wait for Al's return, come and let's sit at the table. We can have some warm cider while we talk."

Mary took the offered seat at the dining table while Ava turned to the buffet to pour two mugs of cider and placing cinnamon sticks in them. The wonderful apple cinnamon aroma tantalized her senses as she took the mug from Ava.

"Thank you." Mary sipped and savored the contents. "Hmm...delicious."

"You're welcome, dear." Ava stared down into the cup she held in her hands before speaking. "Al started painting to help pay for his Ivy League education, while his younger brother, Ben, was set on going to West Point some day. Back in the early years the military was something you wished for your children, in hopes they received an education while learning a skill. Now, it means sending them to war."

"I'm sorry that Ben died, but when Alec told me, all I could do was thank God it wasn't

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Alec that had enlisted in the service,” Mary guiltily confided. “I know it’s a horrible thing to say.”

Ava patted her hand in gentle comfort. “No, I understand, dear and I’m happy that Al has someone like you that he can discuss these things--”

“What things?” Alec asked entering the dining room.

Mary looked up from her cup. She wondered if she would ever get use to the way, her body and heart reacted to him.

“None of your business. Me and Mary are talking girl talk.” Ava winked at Mary and she smile back, thankful for the save, she needed time to think about everything she and Ava had discussed. Was she ready to tell him what he meant to her and throw all her doubts to the wind?

Yes, she told herself, she was ready. Maybe once they returned to the Ranch she would be honest with him and they would be alone with no interruptions or distractions.

“So, beautiful, you talking about me, huh?” Alec turned his green gaze on her and she felt the heat rising to her face.

“I don’t know why you would think that,” Mary chuckled nervously.

“Well, for one, the look you had on your face when you looked at me. Secondly, your ears are turning red,” he winked and sat down beside her. “So give it up? You tell Mummo, I’m the man of your dreams?”

“On that note, I think I will bake the biscuits so we can have breakfast. It looks like it just going to be family this morning so how about we eat at the table in the kitchen. Mary there is a beautiful view of the river that you can see from the kitchen window. Ava grunted and arose from the table.

“That sounds wonderful, I will help you.” Mary moved to stand and Alec grabbed her arm to halt her from moving.

“We’ll be there in a minute, Mummo.” Alec said, not removing his searching eyes from Mary’s face.

Ava chuckled. “You children, take your time, I’m sure there isn’t anything that can’t keep.”

Alec waited for his grandmother to leave the room and said, “Are you okay? I’m so sorry that bastard said those things about you.”

“I’m fine, Alec. I was a military brat. We lived in places that I wasn’t always welcomed and I learned early in my life to develop a thick skin.” She saw the concern etched in his

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brow and she touched his face. "Trust me I've heard worse. Just promise me that no matter what you may hear being said, that you won't react with violence. It's never the answer.

"I apologize, Mary, but it pisses me off that there are still simple minded people in the year 2007!" Alec argued.

"I agree." She smiled her fingers moving from his cheek to cup his chin. "So honestly, do you really care what he has to say about us? He's a stranger, so why fight over it?"

Smiling Alec dipped his head closer to hers and asked softly, "Is there an *us*?"

Heat skittered down her spine and her breath became short puffs. As usual his nearness played havoc with her senses. She bent her head to hide the turmoil of her thoughts. *Should she go ahead and tell him she loved him now?*

He placed a finger beneath her chin and raised her face until she was staring into his eyes. "Talk to me, sweetheart. Am I foolish to hope that you would want me?"

Mary could tell herself that he was a womanizer and there was no way he could truly want to be in a serious relationship with her, but deep down she realized his actions of late had spoke volumes. He's told her about his feelings over his brother's death, he told her about his secret life as the artist Marceau Rubenesque, he protected her from that crude man, and most of all he brought her here to meet someone that is obviously very important to him. How could she not love such a man?

"No, you're not being foolish." Mary rushed out the words before she had the chance to talk herself out of it. Now that the answer hung in the air between them, she couldn't ever take it back.

He grasped her shoulders and bent even closer to her so that his nose nuzzled one side of hers, before moving to whisper in her ear, "So it's okay if I foolishly lose my heart to you, sweet Mary?"

His voice, deep and sensual, sent a ripple of awareness through her. His scent mingled with the appetizing smells from the kitchen seeped into her senses. His eyes clung to hers, studying her face and waiting.

"Yes, it's okay, because I believe we're both being foolish and yes, I want you to lose your heart to me," she replied over her fragile, beating heart.

"Are you still frightened?" He asked.

"Yes. You?"

"Hell, yeah." He said with staid calmness.

"Then, we'll take it one day at a time. Agreed?"

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“Agreed. Does this mean I now have the right to touch you and kiss you when I want?”

Mary could feel Alec’s uneven breathing on her cheek, as he moistened his lips. Her eyelashes fluttered close as his tongue traced the soft fullness of her lips before she felt the heady sensation of his mouth against her mouth.

His glorious mouth over hers, devouring all that she offered, shocked by her own eager response she parted her lips leaning into his strong body as he wrapped his arms around her.

They heard a clatter in the kitchen and Mummo cursing softly and regretfully parted, laughing.

“I think we better get in there, your grandmother is probably starving waiting on us.”

“I’m starving too, but not for food.” Alec murmured before recapturing her lips for a more demanding kiss.

For a moment longer Mary gave in to her desires with reckless abandonment before gaining her senses once more and put her hand against his chest, pushing lightly.

“Alec, there will be time for this later. Whatever she has prepared smells delicious and you forgot I was so busy working I skipped lunch and dinner yesterday.”

“Mmm, okay” he conceded. Too easily she thought until his next words. “Except, maybe we should skip the festivities in the park and head back home so we can do some more of this in private.”

“Alec Mercer, are you denying me the opportunity to bake cookies with Mummo and see the live nativity scene?”

His long fingers tugged her ponytails. “Would you consider me a bad guy if I said, yes?”

“Yes,” she bit her inner lip to keep from grinning like an idiot because she was deliriously happy and would like nothing better then to go back to the ranch and spend the night in Alec’s arms. Nevertheless, if it hadn’t been for his grandmother she would have continued wallowing in self-doubt. At the very least, she owed her at least one day of their company.

Alec released a resounding sigh. “I know that look, your mind is already made up.”

“Yup.”

He took her hand in his and they walked into the kitchen together.

The rest of the morning went by quickly after a hearty breakfast of homemade sourdough biscuits, strawberry canned preserves, fried salmon patties, soft scrambled eggs, and hash browns with onions.

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After breakfast Mummo ushered Alec out the door with a grocery list of items to pick up along with Mary's list of necessities to get her through the night. Once Alec returned Mummo sent him on another errand to take the decorations to the square and help the "men-folk".

With a long baleful look at her, Mary watched Alec sulk his way out of the kitchen.

"Now we can talk freely, it's just us ladies, yah?"

Mary chuckled and nodded.

A few hours later Mary and Mummo bagged the first two batches of cookies chatting as if they were lifelong friends. Mary was contented listening to Mummo's endless narratives of Alec's many youthful adventures. Apparently he, Ben and Ally had fancied themselves superheroes. A broken arm, two sprang ankles, and a cracked rib later the three potential superheroes realized there was no way to emulate these characters in the comic books unless you were from another planet.

The more Mary heard the more she laughed, and the more she laughed deeper she fell in love with the boy Alec had been and the man he'd become. There was so much about him that the world didn't know. Private charity contributions of his time and money alone, was enough to cancel out the persona the media had painted of him. She also understood why he was the type of man that didn't feel the need to defend or justify his actions. Her secret admiration for the object of her desire had grown ten-fold in the last hours alone with Mummo.

By the time Alec returned, Mary was in the kitchen putting away the last of the dried dishes while Mummo went to change clothing. With a deep sigh and a half smile on her lips she reached behind her to undo the apron.

"Here let me get that for you," Alec said. He brushed aside her hands and released the knot from her apron, helping her guide the bib over her head. He folded the apron and moved to place it on the wooden island in the center of the kitchen. "Did you miss me?"

Mary was brimming with thoughts of Alec dancing in her head. Now that she accepted her love for him, she wondered how she could have thought she could live the rest of her life without him? They had been apart most of the afternoon and she hungered to see his smile, look into his eyes and kiss his lips.

Mummo filled her head with so much wonderful information about this man that her heart was fit to bust and she was crushing big time. He was everything she wanted and so much more than she had expected to ever find in her life. Where did she begin to thank him

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for not giving up on her?

Without further delay Mary rushed to Alec filling his empty arms with her needy body. For once she took the initiative and eased a hand behind his neck forcing his to bend towards her so she could claim his lips with her own. He gasped his pleasant surprise against her mouth as his hands currently resting on her shoulders moved to roam her body, caressing and molding her closer to him at the same time.

Mary felt blessed to be able to touch and hold Alec this way, there was something surreal about the moment and she expected to wake up from a dream to find none of today real.

Yet, Alec's mouth had been open and ready when she possessed it. His hands adoring her flesh was real. Everywhere she touched she found muscles and ridges of hardness, assuring her that he was really there in her arms. Her fingertips had grown overly sensitive from her foray along his body, there was no mistaken the reality of her erect nipples and pulsing clitoris.

Alec took hold of one of her hands and tugged and sucked one of her fingers in his mouth. She bit down on her bottom lip to keep from crying out as moisture pooled and seeped into the crotch of her panties. She needed him.

"Oh God, we have to stop," she mumbled breathlessly leaning her face into his chest as she swayed with heady emotions. "I feel as if I'm burning from the inside out."

"Please," Alec moaned palming her breast and rubbing his back and forth against her temple. "More...more."

Mary groaned and disengaged herself from his hands. "Nope, I need to pull myself together, we are about to visit a church and I got all these sinful thoughts in my head."

"Tell me," Alec encouraged. A grin spread his mouth wide, his lips a blush color from her heated kisses. "Tell me, sweet virginal Mary, what sinful thoughts could you possibly be having? Better yet, show me."

She covered her lips with one hand to stave her girlish giggles as she swatted at his hands with the other. "Come on, I'm serious." He pulled her against him and grabbed both her ass cheeks with his hands. Mary could feel his hard erection against her. Her eyes grew big as saucers as she glimpsed his grandmother coming from the sitting room area towards the dining room. "Stop it Alec, here comes Mummo."

"Don't mind me." Mummo called from the dining room before entering the kitchen with a knowing grin.

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Alec turned and moved Mary to stand in front of him. His face still flushed from their heated encounter.

"Al, I don't think I saw that look on your face since I caught you with your hand in the cookie jar when you were six." Mummo laughed. "I don't think this kitchen has seen such happy activity since your grandpapa was alive. Mercy, those were some good days."

"Mummo," Alec grimaced.

Mary laughed at his embarrassment and found him adorable. That is, if such a word could be used for a grown man.

"How do you think your Mamma got here? Or you?" Mummo shook her white head and clucked her tongue. "Why do young people think they have the market cornered on sex?"

"Mummo, it's not that I don't know. I just don't want to know the details or even think about it, for goodness sake," Alec grimaced.

"Well, it does a grandmother good to see her grandson laughing and happy." She reached up and tugged on Alec's ear. "Mary, his mother and I have spent many Christmases wishing for Alec to find someone special and settle down. I think finally this Christmas we've gotten our wish."

"Thank you, Mummo." Mary gushed. It was as close to an approval to their dating that one could get and it meant a lot to her coming from this woman. She just hoped her parents and his would feel the same way.

"Mummo, if your prayers brought Mary to me, then pray that I can keep her by my side." Alec placed a tender kiss to the aging woman's weathered cheek.

"You do right by her Al and you shouldn't have any problems," she assured him. "Now, my babies let's get all this stuffed over to the church. I've never been late since I've been attending and I'm not starting now," Mummo announced. She patted and squeezed both Mary's and Alec's hand as she passed between them.

The party of three packed up all their baked goods and headed to church to drop off everything in the church kitchen. Ava opted to stay at the church to help with preparations and urged Alec to walk Mary over to the square to witness the sunset lighting of the lantern and hear the choir sing.

As they found a comfortable spot in the park amongst many bystanders, Alec drew Mary in front of him and wrapped his arms around shielding her the best he could from the chilly evening air.

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Mary hummed and sung along with the choir, she always had a deep love for Christmas songs and usually went caroling to the local nursing homes with a group of volunteers from the office.

Her body remained on a low burn as Alec nuzzled his mouth against her ear, “You have a lovely voice. Are you enjoying yourself?”

“Very much so, “ she answered, tilting her head to smile up at him. She returned her attention to the singers.

“I can see that Mummo adores you as much as I do.”

His deep husky voice wrapped around her like a warm blanket. She found herself studying her profile in the softly lit surroundings.

“I feel as if I’ve known her all my life,” she admitted. “She’s made me feel very welcomed and our conversation earlier helped me to stop wasting time on doubts and fears.”

“Then I must get Mummo an awesome Christmas gift. It seems I owe her a lot if she is the reason for this change.”

“Isn't that what you hoped for? I assumed that’s why you brought me here to meet her. You knew I would know that you were serious about me once I met your grandmother.” She tilted her head back to accept his kiss, thoroughly enjoying the feeling of not celebrating another holiday without love.

He broke away to stare down into her face. “I didn’t know, Mary,” Alec corrected. “I hoped.”

Before, she could only imagine what it would be like to share her love for the holidays with someone other than family and friends. Now that she knew how it felt to be completely happy and alive, she had no intentions of spending the rest of her life alone. How could she have ever thought that God gave her an illness because he meant for her to spend the rest of her life alone doing good deeds for others?

Mary made a mental note to never allow her disease to take away her chance at living the best possible life she could. Like other women, she dreamed of marriage and a family of her own and now Alec was giving her a chance to dream of the possibility that it could happen.

“What is that smile all about?” Alec leaned back to get a better look at her, a soft closed mouth smile on his face.

“I was just making a few Christmas wishes of my own, since this seems to be the year for them.” Mary grinned at him.

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For a long minute, they looked into each other's eyes, and some strong, basic emotion passed between them. Mary didn't look away, she couldn't if she wanted to, because the desire she saw there matched her own. As if a magnet was drawing him he lowered his head and attacked her lips with his own.

With a resigned sigh she turned in his arms so that he could crush her even closer to deepen the kiss. She leaned into him opening wider for his tongue. A deep moan of pleasure, rumbled from her throat and Mary gave in to the exquisite erotic sensations.

Neither of them no longer heard the singing around them, just the pounding of hearts beating, moaning and smacking of lips that seemed extremely loud to their own ears. Nothing else mattered.

Mary felt her feet leave the ground as if she was floating, as Alec held her tightly against his body, arching back so that there was no questioning his obvious desire to be with her...in her. As her lips clung to his, she moved her hands to the ebony depths of his hair and tangled her fingers in its silken softness.

Alec was the first to regain hold of his senses, thank God, because her brain was completely useless. "Sweetness, I think we are gaining an audience here," he nodded his head down at a cherub faced little girl of about five staring up at them with opened mouth curiosity.

Mary smiled at the little girl and eased her hold on Alec, allowing him to slowly glide her body against his as her feet return to the snow covered ground.

"Oh, how embarrassing," she mumbled hiding her face into the thickness of his coat.

"Mummo, will be at the church for at least another two hours. What say we move this to the house? I want to be with you so bad I'm physically hurting."

At the sound of desperation in Alec's voice, her body tightened and responded in need. She didn't want to wait any longer. "I want to be with you too, Alec"

"Then, why are we still standing here?" Alec laced her fingers with his and started a hasty stroll down the block towards the house.

"Alec, wait." Mary called out. Her face flushed from the pace he sat and she heavily breathed in and blew out the cool evening air.

"Oh, damn, sorry." Alec came to halt. "I was walking to fast for you, wasn't I?"

"No, it's just I changed my mind, I don't want to go back to Mummo's house."

Disappointment entered his expression and he groaned. "Mary, you're killing me here. I promise I won't do any more than you want to do. Just let me hold you and spend some

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time alone with you.” He cupped her full face. “Allow me to kiss you until my body goes numb.”

He dipped his head and kissed her to push his point. Mary accepted his kiss and realized he was distracting her again, as he walked her backwards, towards the direction of the house. She broke the kiss shaking her head, he was good at this, maybe too good. Still for her sake having a man that was an experienced lover wasn’t going to be a bad thing.

“Alec...Alec, look here. No, not at the breasts, here...at these two fingers in front of my face...focus...focus...that’s it,” Mary snorted on a laugh. “I need you to get your mind out of your crotch long enough to listen to me.”

Alec laughed aloud and shook his head. “Okay, now that you got my full attention, go ahead. I promise to try and keep my hands to myself for at least three minutes.”

“I only need one to say this,” she came up on her tiptoes and kissed the side of his neck.

“Damn,” he blew out a long breath of air. “Mary if you keep doing stuff like that I can’t keep my promises. You know I have no problems picking your ass up and carrying you across the street,” he warned.

“Okay...okay,” she laughed with open joy. “I want to be with you, but if we’re going to do this, I don’t want to make love to you in your grandmother’s house. That would be too disrespectful to your grandmother.”

“My God, are you for real?” Alec shook his head and beamed. “You are so adorable, I don’t know whether to kiss you silly, or worship you for being such a rare jewel.”

“How about both. You can kiss me silly and then worship me once you have me naked.” She wiggled her eyebrows at him and in her most seductive voice said, “If you can find a hotel, you can unwrap *me* for Christmas.”

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Alec let out a whoop and made his way towards the first place he came to that had an available sign. Mary waited outside, too embarrassed to go inside with him. She felt like everyone was looking at them and knew what they were about to do. It wasn't true of course, just her crazy nervous thoughts.

Alec came out of the office with key in hand. They made their way to their assigned room pausing for his hungry kisses and her anxious laughter.

Mary hadn't expected Alec to unlock the door, then turn to her and lift her off her feet carrying her across the threshold, she instantly remembered something she told her mother years ago, "I will marry the man that can lift my fat ass and carry it over the threshold." *I found him, mom!*

They stood just beyond the threshold when Alec lowered her to her feet and kicked closed the door. Neither noticed the contents of the room or cared about the dim lighting coming from the bathroom. They hurriedly peeled off each other's coats, gloves, and scarves. Alec removed her ponytail holders and her hair fell to her shoulders.

"I love your hair." He burrowed his fingers in its thick silky depths to hold her face in place. He tilted his head to the side and hers the other, slashing his mouth over hers while moaning his appreciation.

Alec reached down and lifted the peach cashmere sweater over her head, they giggled as her glasses came off with it. Mary hurriedly removed them from the entangled sweater and placed them on the wooden stand beside the bed.

Alec eyes feasted on the site before him, Mary in her jeans, boots, and a lacy cream-colored bra. Her wonderful large breasts jiggled in the bra cups as she tugged his black sweater over his head. Momentarily everything was hidden from his view and he brushed aside her hands and made short work of removing the sweater and the white t-shirt beneath.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" Mary blushing looked away sweeping her hair behind her ears.

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"I'm sorry," he chuckled. "You have the most beautiful eyes. I feel as if I could drown in their dark pools. Why do you hide them behind glasses?" He cupped her face as if he was truly taking all of her in for the first time.

"I'm not hiding, I just want to be able to see," she grinned.

"You know contacts are a wonder these days."

"Yes, but I have astigmatisms and I can only wear them for a short time or I get a headache. What?" She shook her head at his look of doubt. "I have contacts also, but I read all the time and wear them only for special occasions. Do you really want to waste the little time we have discussing my eyewear?"

"No, you're beautiful, with or without your glasses," he mumbled against her lips as she worked at his belt buckle.

"Oh, good answer, Mr. Mercer."

"Damn, you called me 'Mister Mercer'. You know what that means," he said in a playfully threatening voice.

"No, what?" She bent her head and placed a moist tender kiss to his naked, lightly hair-covered chest.

Alec gasped and closed his eyes from the wonderful sensation of having Mary's lips on him. She testily licked one of his nipples and he bit down on the back of his teeth willing himself to be patient and not give into the need to rush things, just because it's been awhile since he made love to a woman.

She pulled back to look up into his face. "You were saying?" She arched an eyebrow in question.

"Saying? What was I saying?" Alec frowned in confusion. "Oh, I remember. You're fired, Ms. Christmas."

"Mmm, good. I didn't want to be another cliché around the office for sleeping with my boss anyway," she teased.

He stepped forward against Mary until the back of her legs hit the bed and they laughingly fell onto the mattress.

"Whoa Alec, I thought you were a 007 in the bedroom. A skilled, smooth kind of lover, especially if the rumors are true about you."

Alec lifted his head from the wet tongue trail he was making down the side of her neck to her shoulder pulling her bra strap with him. "Don't believe everything you hear, but in this case they all are true." He wiggled his eyebrows at her. "Still, you try being suave,

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while having a raging *hard-on* making it damn near impossible to think coherently.”

“Then by all means, ignore my protest and go back to kissing me,” Mary commanded.

“My pleasure,” he murmured settling his lips until they felt perfect against hers and urged her mouth wider so his tongue could enter.

Mary heard a low moaning sound of pleasure in his throat as she sucked on his tongue. Her hands swept over his naked back, cupping the belt loops of his jeans to hold onto something as intense neediness continue to build inside her.

As he shifted, her jean clad thighs spread wider to accommodate him as his hips made the circular motion of lovemaking against her. Her heart raced and she felt a fear of the unknown, but she was sure she wanted her first time to be with him.

“Oh.” She cried out as her breast sprang free, she looked at him with amazement. She hadn’t even felt his fingers graze her when he unsnapped the back snap of her bra. “You are good.”

He grinned. “You haven’t seen anything, yet.”

Mary laughter died on a moan of pleasure-pain as he alternately kissed, caressed, and sucked her nipples. She loved the way he seemed to adore her with his fingertips. Each stroke hinted at his artistic side. She felt as if his fingers were sculpting and shaping her breast molding them perfectly to his hands.

“I knew you would be exquisite, I just didn’t realize how much” his voice rasped. “You must let me paint your portrait, Mary.” He took a portion of her breast along with nipple and areola, and tugged deeply.

Mary cried out and arched against him flailing from side to side, digging her nails into his shoulders. She felt the tugging all the way to her vagina.

“Please, Alec,” she whimpered. She wasn’t sure what she was begging for. She just knew she wouldn’t be able to take the pressure building up in the pit of her stomach much longer without some sort of relief.

When she felt his fingers at the waist she reached down to help him. There was no time to dwell on the fact that she was about to get completely naked for the first time in front of a man. She’d gotten close a couple of times and failed to go any further. This time she knew she was going all the way, for Alec didn’t look at her in repulsion. Looking at his face as he looked at her made her feel like the most desired woman in the entire world.

She closed her eyes as he finished undressing her. Her boots thudded to the floor followed by her jeans and panties.

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“Give me a moment,” he said and stood, quickly toeing off his shoes, before shuffling down his jeans and boxer-briefs, kicking them aside. “Open your eyes, Mary I want you to get accustomed to seeing me this way. There will be no shame or embarrassment in our bedroom. It will be the one place we shed all pretense, fears and worries and be ourselves.”

She came up on her elbows as he stood proudly before her. She admired the security he had in his skin. It was powerful and sexy. Mary appreciated the care he took in his body. He was lean and muscular, a runner’s body. His penis was standing proud reaching towards his navel, trails of bluish-green veins protruding its length. It was intimidating in some ways, but she couldn’t be more please. Alec’s body was a work of art. It was everything she imagined and more. There was nothing about this man she found lacking, not even the grafting scars running from the side of his calf and up his thigh took away from his sexual appeal.

“You are so...*fine*,” she praised him with a broad smile.

He smiled his welcome moving to join her on the bed his heavy leg pinning her to the bed as he eased her onto her back. Mary welcomed the weight and feel of his naked heated flesh against hers. The spray of silky hair on his chest tickled the nipple of the breast pressed against him in such a delicious way.

The feel of his muscular arm under the tracing of her fingertips made her feel vulnerable and small in comparison.

Alec’s fingers grazed the contours of her face as if he was forever emblazing it into his memory. “I can’t believe you felt you had to keep your body hidden, because of these scars.” He nuzzled the one beneath her right arm where she had had skin grafted from her outer thigh. “You are so lovely, the soft fullness of your body, the taste...the smell of you, so gloriously delicious. I don’t see anything but your perfection, Mary. Thank you for allowing me to be your first.”

“I’m glad you’re going to be my first,” she managed to speak, her voice cracking with emotions. No man had ever gloried in her body as Alec was doing. If anything it made her love him even more.

Hopefully you will be my last. She spoke the words in her head she could not say aloud. She didn’t want to jinx any possibility of a future with Alec, by making him think she expected more than what they’d already shared.

Mary tensed and he must have sensed it. He lifted his dark head and looked in her eyes.

“Sweetheart, if I do anything to make you uncomfortable, or anything that you enjoy the

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most," he kissed the corners of her mouth. "Tell me."

Mary didn't know how she was supposed to speak another word. Alec was sweeping a wide tongue over her nipples, beneath her breast and along her ribcage. She finally managed a stoic nod, gasping. Her body was already addicted to his hot searching mouth. She didn't want him to ever stop.

Tears blinded her vision. The gentle way he adored her brought forth emotions she didn't know she possessed. He seemed to purposely seek out and place loving kisses to the many scars left by her Hidradenitis. Alec was making it clear that her scars were as much a part of her body as her breast and vagina.

"Oh Alec," she cried. Her heart brimmed with love for this man to the point it was painful.

His tongue, moist and hot, sought out her secret concaves finding sensitive spots she never imagined existed. Mary only imagined what it would feel like to look down and see a man's head nestled between her thick thighs. Yet, this sensation was not one that could imagine. It was agonizing ecstasy in its purist basic form.

Her breathing came out rough and ragged while shaky fingers combed through the silky-smoothness of his dark hair and scraped her nails across his scalp. Alec's hands were kneading her stomach, caressing the curve of her hip, cupping her ass cheeks, squeezing briefly before guiding and shouldering her thighs over his shoulders. For a moment she tensed thinking the heaviness of her legs would be too much for him, but his grip on her assured her that he was in complete control and she submitted to the sensations clamoring through her trembling flesh.

Mary jerked and gasped as pleasurable pain shot through her lower extremities. The growing sensitivity of her clitoris almost became unbearable as he suckled and manipulated it with the hotness of his mouth.

She arched her hips as he held her refusing to allow her thighs to drop or close when it became unbearable. Alec was like a man starving, lifting her thigh up to receive the full stroking of his long tongue and for Mary his hunger for her was exhausting. She didn't believe she could have so many orgasms in a row. Her limit from masturbating with her fingers was two and then numbness usually set in. Her ability to be multi-orgasmic was pleasantly unexpected. Alec's tongue worked miracles, bringing forth a womanly gratification she never known. At this point he could do anything to her and she would be helpless to stop him. She was his.

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“Alec...ah...ah...no more...no more!” Mary cried out, hot tears falling down the side of her face. She struggled with her breathing, fleetingly wondering if people could die from too much pleasure. She could feel her wet juices flowing between the crack of her ass as her body trembled against the waves of another orgasm.

His deep chuckle brought her back to consciousness and she opened her eyes to find him leaning over her with a big beautiful smile, his lips red and full from the ultimate kiss he shared with her.

“My God woman, you taste wonderful! *Sweet*, just like I imagined.” He dipped his head and placed a tender kiss to her lips before pulling back to look at her once more to say, “I would never need another meal if I could live down there between your legs.”

She flushed in embarrassment tasting herself on his mouth. “No you couldn’t, because if you touched my clitoris one more time, I would have died. Alec--” Mary hesitated to say it. Never had she thought she would be in a hotel room having this conversation with a man. Not just any man, but the man she has secretly coveted for years. This was somewhat of a surreal moment for her.

“What is it, sweetheart?” He encouraged softly.

“I want to know what it feels like to have you inside me,” Mary rushed out. “I know I seemed hesitant about losing my virginity to you at first, but I’m sure, that I want it to be you, no matter what.”

“So do I, baby.” His brow puckered in concern. “Why would you think otherwise?”

“Well,” she blushed once more. “After going down *there*, like that, I thought it was because you were trying to avoid taking my virginity.”

Alec grinned and threw his head back in laughter. “Mary, you are such a joy. I only wish I could be as magnanimous as you think I am. Trust me my love, this was not my intent. I tasted your potent juices for purely selfish reasons. My desire to lick your clitoris while sticking my tongue in your wet pussy, and making you scream my name was very premeditated.”

Mary released girlish giggles as he lowered his head and pretended to bite her throat like a vampire, hitting her ticklish spots only to end his playfulness lovingly nibbling the side of her neck and kiss the spot before lifting his head once more.

“Before we continue, we must discuss something important,” he stated, his deep voice taking on a serious tone.

Mary frowned her concern.

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"I'm tested every six months and usually wear protection, so if you aren't on any form of birth control--"

"Don't worry, I take birth control pills to regulate my periods." She lifted a hand and touched his face. She was touched that he would take the time out to bring up a subject she wasn't sure how to approach without ruining the moment. "It's okay, I've been on them long enough to not feel concerned about getting pregnant."

"Still, I'm going to use a condom, because you shouldn't have to take my word on such an important matter as my being tested or not," he assured her. "When we return to Seattle I will show you my latest test results, or get tested again, if you wish. Mary, I want you to know that once you entrust your body to me I will take care of it, as well as my own and I know you have health concerns beyond the normal, with your illness."

"Alec," she whispered and silently thanked God for this man.

"Sweetheart, I know all of this is somewhat new to you and you've waited a long time to go into this blindly like some grappling naive teenager, and I'm too experienced to let you." Alec brought her hand up to his lips. "Once you take this step there is much responsibility that comes with being active sexually, because I assure you there is no turning back once you've taken this life altering step."

She nodded her understanding saying, "Thank you for your concern Alec. It means a lot to me, that you are looking after me. I did have a lot of questions but I thought asking would spoil the mood. I didn't want to seem stupid about such things, especially at my age," Mary admitted.

"If we can be lovers, Mary, we can discuss these intimate matters openly otherwise you shouldn't be in this bed with me. There are things you need to look out for afterwards..."

"Such as?"

"Such as, any feminine problems afterwards. I don't know if you are aware of the possibility, but some women find that they are allergic to latex condoms, so I use non-latex just in case," he assured her.

"Okay," Mary said and asked, "Alec, are you also giving me time, to change my mind about doing this? Are you sure you aren't having second thought? I know you said you didn't want the responsibility--"

She was surprised to see his handsome features hardened with intensity. "Mary, I want you so bad now, I think my balls are turning blue from lack of release. But you're right. I do feel being your first is a big responsibility and in my head I'm thinking, you can only have

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one *first time*. I can barely remember mine it was such a awkward blur with an older woman.” He shook his head. “Baby, I want you to be sure, it’s the right time and that you’re giving this precious gift to the right person.”

Mary sat up and he came up beside her. She reached out and roamed a hand across his mussed hair. Her eyes searching his face noting his concern was genuine. “Alec, this moment so far as been so much more the I could hope for. Being here with you and you being my first is the only thing I know I’m sure about, I’ve known it from the moment I saw you that I wanted you.”

His eyes grew wide, his surprise apparent on his face.

“I don’t know what will happen between us afterwards and I don’t want to think about it. I just want to make the best of this moment, being here with you, like this. I want to touch you, taste you as you’ve tasted me, and keep this memory for the rest of my days.”

She smiled as he released a long shivering sigh. The relief showed bright on his face and he grinned foolishly at her. His consideration to her welfare was one of the reasons Mary loved him. No man could have a reputation as a lover without being a considerate one. She realized something others didn’t. Women may have slept with him easily because he was wealthy, but it wasn’t the money that made them want to hold on to him when he was pushing them away. He was a good man with lots of love to give. Each of those women knew it, and wanted to be the *one* woman that could seize his heart forever.

She watched in curious anticipation as Alec moved to sit on the edge of the bed. He lifted his pants off the floor retrieving a condom from his wallet and turned to look at her a passionate light flaming in his stormy green eyes. “Would you like to do the honors or save it for another time?”

Mary shook her head, “My hands are shaking so bad, I think I will make a mess of things,” she laughed nervously. Her eyes going back to his beautiful erection as he tore open the pack with his teeth and placed the condom on it’s weeping tip before rolling the condom down to encase him. “Can I touch it?”

“Please do,” he managed while looking her over seductively.

Mary reached out and ran a finger along the length of his penis and it moved. She released a surprised squeal and drew back her hand in laughter.

Alec laughed with her, taking her hand in his he guided it back down between his legs and guided her fingers. His voice was tight with need when he said, “I like to be held like this.” He squeezed her hand around him and gasped, “With that much pressure. Now move

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your hand like this. That's it."

Mary stroked him, taking her queue from his moans and heavy breathing. Just looking at his face turned her on, and the aroma of musky arousal permeated her nostrils, she wasn't sure if it was him, her, or the both of them. A moisture grew hot and heavy between her thighs as she sat on her legs beside him, her breast pressed against his side.

She separated her knees to accommodate his wondering hand that started with massaging her round butt cheeks before dipping in the crack and etching downward to find her wet slick labia. Mary bit her bottom lip and moan, moving against his hand, while stoking him the way he liked it. She didn't miss his open examination and approval of her hand on his cock.

His fingers were caressing her wetness until she felt the tension building once more. He matched the pace of her stroking and when he increased speed, so did she while grinding against his trusting fingers.

"Now," she panted frantically. "I want you inside me...now."

Releasing him, his hand dropped from her and she lifted it and suckled the fingers that had been inside her into her mouth. Slowly she eased back to rest against the stacked pillows on the bed drawing him to her. Alec came willingly, settling himself between her thighs, his face contorted in pleasure as she tugged on his finger, sucking, long and hard.

"You're getting the seducing part down," he croaked.

She chuckled from her throat because her mouth was busy making love to the hand that had given her intense pleasure.

He tugged his finger from her mouth and she released it with a loud 'pop' and a wet mouth grin.

Happiness filled her as he spoke loving erotic words in her ear with wet kisses leaving a trail to her lips. His tongue traced the soft fullness of her mouth. It sent new spirals of ecstasy through her.

His lips brushed against hers as he spoke, "My sweet Mary, if you could only see yourself through my eyes as this moment. You are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

For the moment, she believed it. She felt beautiful and more alive than she had her entire life. He kissed the pulsing hollow at the base of her throat drawing forth a hoarse moan. Burying her face in his neck, she panted a kiss there and sucked leaving her mark of passion upon him.

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His lips captured hers, more demanding this time. Mary returned his kiss with reckless abandonment. It was a kiss that melted all fears, purging them from her soul. Mary's knees spread wider and she bucked up against the hard erection between them. She desperately wanted to feel Alec inside her. She knew only he could douse the inferno he had created in her body. It no longer felt like it was hers to control.

Taking his cock in hand, he settled himself her entrance easing the head in. She tensed as she felt him come up against her barrier before he pushed his way through and plunged deeply into her.

Mary cried out, her nails biting into his shoulders as a burning sensation followed by a pressured of impossible fullness invaded her body. She was thankful he held himself up on his arms to keep his slender hips still. She needed a moment to adjust to the length and girth of his cock buried inside her vaginal canal.

"Damn, woman, you feel so fucking good." He grunted. "I don't know if I can hold this erection for my usual bout this first time. It's been awhile and I feel as if I'm about to explode."

"Are you okay?" She asked temporarily alarmed by the redness of his face. A vein was visibly pumping in his forehead and his shoulders were visibly tense beneath her fingers.

"Oh yeah," he blew out a puff of air. "Whew!" He grinned and winked at her. "I got it under control and it's I that should be asking that question. Are you okay?"

Hot tears were falling down the sides of her face and she didn't know why, she wasn't in any pain, just a dull achy throbbing from her vaginal muscles adjusting to the invasion.

Alec eased himself down to his elbows and wiped her tears away with his thumbs. "Mary, speak to me, sweetheart. Are you okay? Is it too much? I've never been with a virgin and I should have entered you a bit slower, or a little at a time." He rattled on, his voice filled with growing concern.

"Alec, baby, calm down. It's okay. I'm okay." She smiled up at him. "I've never felt so close to another person before. It's as if we've become one body and one soul. I can feel your heartbeat inside me and its one with mine. This scares the hell out of me," she admitted. Her voice sounded hoarse with emotion. "But I will kill you if you stop."

"Don't be scared, my love." Alec looked into her eyes, his eyes shimmering with emotions of his own. "Mary, I've never done this and it feels so right and fulfilling. It confirms what I already know in my heart and you don't have to say anything, but I want you to know how I feel." The Adams apple in his throat bobbed as he swallowed deeply before

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saying, "I love you, Mary."

"You can't say that, Alec," she cried. "Not yet, not now, because it's easy to mistake what we are feeling now for love." She placed her feet flat on the bed, causing her legs to widen more. He slid deeper inside her. Mary gasped. This was one of the happiest moments of her entire life and she didn't want to ruin the experience with words and promises he may not be able to keep. "Give me this moment, so that I won't have more expectations than you are willing to give. If we choose to be together we can discuss everything else later."

"There is no 'if', Mary. We will be together," Alec vowed through clenched teeth, his brow glistening with sweat. "You don't have to love me in return, I know it may be too soon, but you can't stop me from feeling the way I do."

"Oh, Alec."

He clasped her hips, welding their bodies together and started pumping and grinding against her. Mary matched him thrust for thrust. She wallowed in the security she felt as he whispered endearing words in her ear, telling her all the delicious things he wanted to do to her body, promising her he would win her heart.

His words alone pushed her to scream her release once more, this time bringing him with her. Alec cried out her name repeatedly as he convulsed in her arms. Mary held him tightly, biting her tongue to keep saying the words of love that sprang to her lips. She wanted to tell him when they weren't in the throws of crazy heated ecstasy. No one could possibly think clearly during a time like this, not even the great Alec Mercer.

Alec was flat on his back in the bed, wishing he didn't have to wake Mary. He wanted to stay the entire night at the Inn so he could hold her in his arms and make love to her again and again for the remainder of the night. Never had he felt so greedy, he couldn't seem to get enough of her. When he was spent and slid out of her hotness, all he could think about was getting back in there again, feeling this way again.

Still, his Mary was her usually considerate self. She was concerned about what his Mummo would think if they stayed out all night, not to mention how worried she would be if they didn't check in with her soon. He called to tell Mummo, they would be late, and she assured him it was fine, reminding him that the church was only a short walk away from the house.

Alec knew his grandmother wasn't blind. He knew that she was aware of the significance of his bringing a woman to his family homestead to meet her. He also was sure

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she suspected what was happening between him and Mary tonight, but of course he wouldn't tell Mary that, she would be horrified with embarrassment.

His silly lovable Mary, he grinned in the darkness. Whatever she wanted, she would get. From this day onward her happiness was his main concern. He was in love, truly for the first time in his life and it was such a glorious surreal feeling. He felt like shouting it to the world, at the very least calling his parents and telling them. It was something they had waited along time for him to experience.

Alec brushed back her frizzed hair with his fingertips placing a loving kiss to her brow. A smug grin came to his lips. He had exhausted her. Poor thing, he hadn't meant to be so insatiable. She probably thought he was an inconsiderate oaf, but quickly after his first taste, she had become an addiction he couldn't get enough of and he didn't think he ever would. She would be sore and probably curse him like she did after that first pee, but it was okay, he would even let her beat him up as long as she didn't send him away.

A shadow of disappointment came over his current mood. He told her he loved her and she hadn't reacted as he had hoped. She had given in to her physical desire for him, but obviously, the jury was still out on whether he was worthy of her heart.

If she didn't want to hear him say he loved her right now, he doubted she would appreciate him proposing. She most likely would think he did so because she gave him her virginity. Why was falling in love so damned complicated? He supposed if he had been in love before he would have known to handle this entire situation better. He leaned down to kiss her brow again only to find her eyes open and staring at him in question? Of what he wasn't sure and he didn't trust to ask.

To be safe he opted to smile at her.

She smiled back causing his heart to patter foolishly. He felt...hopeful.

"Hello, sleeping beauty, how are you feeling?"

Mary snuggled against him, half-on, and half-off his body releasing a row of contented sighs, her knee brushed against his soft penis. Immediately he became semi-hard and he was amazed, four erections in the matter of hours even impressed the hell out of him. What was it about this woman that made him feel insatiable?

"Sore," she admitted. "Yet, it's a good kind of soreness."

Leaning down he crooked a finger beneath her chin and tilted her face to meet his. He pressed a peck to her lips. "I'm sorry, I should have been a bit more gentle."

"No you shouldn't," she released a throaty chuckle. "I gave as good as I got and I got it

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just the way I wanted it. You surpass your reputation. Alec Mercer, you are a wonderful lover.”

Alec grunted, “Says the woman that has no other to compare my expertise against?”

“Mmm, are you saying you want me to go out and get some more experience so I can give you a comparison study?” she quirked her right eyebrow at him in question.

Alec stiffened not seeing the humor in her statement. “Don’t even tease me so, Mary. I plan on being your first, and your last for the rest of your and my life, if you’d let me.”

“You know I plan on living a long time don’t you?”

“I’m counting on it.” His eyes twinkled lovingly.

“So, handsome, I suppose we need to get up, shower, and get back to your grandmother’s. She should be back home by now and wondering what happened to us.”

“I called her and told her we would be in late, but I wish you would change your mind. Mummo will understand.” He outlined her face with his fingers. “I really would like to spend the night holding you just like this and I think we need to talk about what I said to you while we were making love.”

He felt Mary tense and briefly closed his eyes, wondering why he had the need to rush things? If a woman had done this to him just a month ago, he would have reacted with as much tension as Mary. He told himself he would give her time and then found himself pushing her to make some kind of emotional commitment about their future. When had his he became the woman he used to date?

He dropped his arms to his side as Mary disengaged herself from his body and sat up on the side of the bed, reaching for the slightly blood stained bathing towel he used to dry her off after he had used a wash cloth to clean off the dried blood from the first time they made love.

He watched helplessly as she place the towel around her. It only came so far, but it covered enough that his hardening cock got the message. There would be no more loving for him tonight.

“Alec, there will be plenty of time for us to talk once we’re back at your ranch. We have the remainder of the week to get all of this sorted out.”

Mary stood and he clasped her hand in his, not giving her the chance to run off. She stopped and looked at him. “It’s only a little after eight, sweetheart. It’s still early.”

“Alec, I adore your grandmother and she promised to show me how to make a chocolate Bavarian torte before we turn in tonight. I hope to make one for Christmas.

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“Mary, Mummo, makes tortes at the ranch once the family arrives. We can come back to pick her up take her to the ranch. You will have the rest of the holiday to make tortes, until you heart is contented. This is our night.”

“Alec, I will be going home next week and I will be waking up Christmas morning like I traditionally do in my old bedroom at their home,” she reminded. “Remember the deal was if my parents couldn’t make it I give you this week and spend Christmas week with them.”

He couldn’t believe she was smiling at him as if it would soften her words. It pissed him off that even though she had physically given him the most precious gift a woman can give a man it hadn’t changed her feelings for him. She still saw him as a selfish womanizer and was too sexually naïve to realize a selfish man would never had been so concerned about her needs in bed as he had.

Alec felt the pain of rejection in the pit of his stomach. How could Mary want to leave him at the end of the week? He knew what this was. It was the fates paying him back for all the women that had shed tears over his callous behavior in the past.

“I was hoping that we could wake up Christmas morning, together,” Alec mumbled.

“What?” Mary eyes widened. “I haven’t even met your parents yet and you want to sleep together with them under the same roof? I don’t know how understanding your family is, but mine aren’t, when it comes to sex. Thanks, but no thanks, Alec. I don’t want your family to see me as another one of your assistants that you’ve slept with.”

He dropped her hand. “That is not what’s going on between us, Mary and even though you want to keep giving yourself excuses to keep me at an emotional distance, for what reason I don’t know, you can’t use my past indiscretions as an excuse.”

“Alec--”

“Nope, Mary, I’m not doing this little dance with you again,” he said angrily. “Until you start saying something I want to hear, there is nothing else to say. I told you how I feel, you don’t reciprocate and it makes me wonder if this time I’m the one being used. Trust me, I won’t beg you to return my love.” He rolled off the bed onto his feet, dragging on his jeans. He adjusted himself, tugged up his zipper and fastened his top button. “I’m not going to tell you *I love you* again until you I hear you say it.”

“Alec, I do--”

He pulled his sweater over his head and tucked his underwear into his coat pocket as he picked it up. He held up a finger to Mary to quiet her next words. “Don’t you dare say it now, because like you said, it will seem as if you were saying it in the heat of the moment.”

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He combed his hands through his tumbled hair. "I hope you realize that I have feelings too before it's to fucking late!"

"Alec...wait! Don't be upset. Hey...where...where are you going," her voice rose an octave.

"I'm going to the front office to pay the hotel bill. I'll shower once we get back to Mummo's."

Even though he wanted to stay and work things out, Alec knew it was best to put some distance between them before he lost what was left of his pride by saying or doing something foolish. He walked out of the room where he had just spent the most satisfying and disappointing three and a half hours of his entire life. Looking up towards the heaven he closed his eyes and welcome the cold shower of light snow against his face.

CHAPTER TWELVE

This relationship stuff was new to Mary, but it didn't take a dating expert to tell her she'd made a mess out of one of the most beautiful moments she'd ever had, and if she wasn't sure she blew it, Alec made it clear on the silent ride back to Greenwater Ranch.

He had barely even glanced her way and by the time the SUV rolled to a halt in front of the house, she was ready to give into anything he wanted. She loved him and she was only hurting him and herself by waiting for a perfect time to say it. There wasn't such a thing as the perfect time when it came to love. What they had was precious and rare so now that she had found the one person she wanted to spend the rest of her life with she wanted to tell the world, most of all she wanted to tell the man she loved.

"Alec," she began releasing her seat belt, turning in her seat to look at him. "We need to talk. I can't take this silent treatment. Please, let's talk about this or at least listen to what I have to say."

He cut the engine and turned to look at her. His face remained stern, but what she saw in his eyes as he stared at her gave her hope. As Mummo advised her, she would tell him she loved him and trust him with her feelings.

"Mary, I--what the hell?" His gaze drifted towards the front porch beyond her shoulder.

Mary turned and gasped as a stunningly beautiful woman stood at the top of the steps, wrapped in a white fur coat. Her auburn hair swept up in a sophisticated chignon and makeup flawless. From here Mary could see her pale skin rosy and glowing from the chill of the outside air. It seemed only to add to her ethereal loveliness.

Mary had seen the woman in magazines, and thought it was all smoke and mirrors. In this case, she was just like her photos and Mary felt her heart fall to the bottom of her oversized stomach as she looked through the windshield at Erica Fontaine.

As if in suspended disbelief Alec opened the door to the SUV and made his way towards Erica leaving Mary to stare at him in silence as she reached down at let herself out of the vehicle. It didn't take her long to start feeling as if she was on the outside looking in.

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She didn't know what to do, she felt trapped. Mary leaned against the vehicle trying her best to blend into the background. If she stepped forward she felt as if she was intruding and if she passed her, she couldn't go in the house until Alec unlocked the door.

Either way she was disappointed by Alec's reaction to seeing Erica standing there. She could only surmise he had lied to her because this elegant calm woman didn't act like a woman that had been dumped.

Mary remained by the car. She was curious as to how Alec would talk his way out of this one. She crossed her arms across her breast and waited for one of them to say something. She didn't have to wait long.

"Alec, darling, I tried to wait until next week, but there is so much I need share with you. I had the best meeting with the wedding planner from Paris. He gave us some excellent ideas."

"Erica, didn't you get my message," Alec scowled. "Why didn't you return any of my calls?"

Mary noticed the woman's smile only slipped a bit, but her recovery was remarkable, because if you'd blinked you wouldn't notice she had been affected whatsoever by Alec's rude statement.

"I've been busy and the few times I called I got your voice mail. Didn't you get any of my messages? I told you I would be coming earlier so that I could help get things ready for our families' arrival. I know you're busy with work and I promise I won't be in the way of you and your assistant." Erica patted his cheek and came down the steps towards her with hand outstretched. "Hello. I'm Alec's fiancée, Erica Fontaine, you're must be the assistant I told Alec he needed. Someone sturdy, dependable and hardworking, your name is?"

Mary smiled and took her proffered hand in introduction, nearly backing up from the powerful waft of Gardenia smelling perfume overwhelming her nostrils.

Mary briefly glanced at Alec before returning Erica's smile. "Hello, I'm Mr. Mercer's *temporary* assistant, Mary Christmas."

"You got to be kidding. Is that really your name or are you being festive?" Erica laughed

Mary thought the woman's laughter sounded as insincere as she looked. There was no way Erica could love Alec as much as she did. If he was hers and truly loved her she'd make sure he was the happiest man alive. Grudgingly, she scanned the younger woman's statuesque frame from head to toe. She was about five-feet-seven and adding what look like

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four-inch heeled boots, Mary had take a few steps back to keep from straining her neck. Mary wondered how she gracefully descended the snow-covered steps without busting her ass.

“No joke. It's my name.” Mary forced a bigger smile. “Blame my Momma.”

“You look familiar, maybe you worked in my daddy's offices at one time or the other?” Erica tapped her toe on the snow dusted stone drive.

Mary shook her head hunching her shoulders beneath her coat reaching the pull the hood over her head to keep the chilly breeze off her ears. “I don't think so.”

“Oh, now, I remember you're Lawrence Owens' girl.” Erica placed a perfectly French manicured hand to her face letting her gaze sweep over Mary from head to toe. “I saw you at the Christmas dinner, dressed up like Mother Christmas or something other. That was almost a year ago.”

Mary ignored the urge to shift from foot to foot in her freshly washed clothing she'd worn going on two days. She also felt infantile and wished she hadn't placed her hair back into the two ponytails. “Yeah, that probably was me. You know Mr. Owens?”

“Of course, I know all of Alec's executives.” Erica said licking her dark red lips and glanced back at Alec, who seemed to have grown motionless. “Alec has mentioned you a time or two but I never really paid attention to what he said your name was.”

“All good I hope,” Mary commented softly.

“Of course, dear. Even Owens sang your praise about how sweet you were and your ability to remember everyone's birthday and such was short of amazing. I'm glad Alec has you to help him, maybe he can finish earlier and enjoy the holiday.”

“It's already finished, so he is *free* to enjoy the rest of his holiday with his fiancée. I'm sure there is much to discuss before the big day,” Mary mumbled. It was the best she could do when she felt like sobbing her eyes out.

“I don't know why you would only be a temporary, if you're finished working already, then I will sway my darling to hire you away from Owens.” Erica giggled placing her hand on Mary's arm as if they were best friends and leaning closer she said, “I told him, that he had to get rid of that current gold-digging assistant and replace her with—well, someone like yourself— before I would even consider marrying him.”

Mary bit down on her back teeth, her eyes briefly closing and reopening before Erica pulled back. “Someone like me?”

“Yes, you know. Someone he wouldn't be attempted to sleep with. I even suggested he

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consider a male assistant,” Erica answered.

“I see.”

“Erica, enough.” Alec finally stepped down from the steps. “Mary, I tried to call her and I left messages, you have to believe me. I--” His deep voice trailed off as she gave him a look that told him she wasn’t going to have this discussion with him; especially not in front of her.

“Alec, what are you doing? Why are you speaking to her like that? I’m sure Mary doesn’t need to hear about our petty squabble, isn’t that right dear?”

Mary swallowed the lump in her throat and was thankful she didn’t get the chance to tell Alec how she felt. That really would give them something to laugh about tonight when they went to bed as if she hadn’t already made a big enough fool of herself by sleeping with him.”

“Miss Fontaine, again, congratulations on your engagement.” Mary put on her good face, threw back her shoulders and with all the effort, she could muster walked up the steps and tested the doorknob, thankful it was unlock, she pushed her way in slamming the door close behind her.

Mary leaned back against the door for a moment to regain her composure but she couldn’t stop the tears that burned her eyes and slid down her cheeks. She looked up to see George coming from the kitchen wiping his hands on a dishtowel.

“Welcome back, Mary. Can I get you anything?”

“Yes, uh...can you give me a ride to the closest airport or bus station? I really need to go home. I’m missing my family and I think I’ve been away long enough.”

“There is only transportation by vehicle, sweetheart, the nearest transportation is a train about two hours away. I will be glad to have company to Seattle to pick up the stuff Al ordered for the orphanage.” George said softly with understanding. “That is, if you don’t mind waiting until the day after tomorrow.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot all about that. You’re probably really busy getting ready for the event.” She dabbed at her damp face with the back of her coat sleeve.

“Yeah, and I was looking forward to having you with us, Mary.”

“Maybe, some other time, George,” she said with a sad grin. “But I will accept that ride.”

He returned her smile. “Sounds like a plan.”

“George, I would appreciate it if you kept this between us. Alec might find something else to keep me busy, if he gets wind that I’m leaving earlier than expected.” She chuckled

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through her tears and sniffled. "You know how he can be."

"Unfortunately, yes, and I had hoped this time, things were different." George sighed deeply. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It is what it is," Mary stated softly. "I'm going to turn in early, don't worry about dinner for me, if I get hungry I will open me a can of soup later. Thanks again for everything George."

"My pleasure, Mary."

She made her way up the staircase to the second floor, closing the world off as she curled up on the bed in the bedroom she occupied, willing all thoughts of the time she shared with Alec to disappear.

"Where is your car Erica? You're not staying." Alec grounded out between clenched teeth. He ran his hands through his hair and looked up at the door after Mary went in. He could only imagine what she must be thinking. He cursed aloud.

"I had my driver to drop me off." Erica pulled her coat collar up. "Let's go in, darling, it's freezing out here."

"No! I'm serious you're not staying Erica." Alec marched over to the SUV and opened the door. "Get in."

"Alec, what's gotten into you? You can't be serious?" She shrieked at him.

"Do I look like I'm playing here?" He cocked his head to the side in question. "Get in the damned car."

Erica cast him a long look before sliding into the car, moving her fur out of the way, as Alec slammed the door and went around to enter on the driver's side.

"Now that you've treated me like shit, I'm hoping you will calm down and hear me out," she stated matter-of-factly. Alec pulled the car door close.

"I was clear in my messages to you Erica. I told you it was over that I had met someone else and I didn't want you to come here." Alec stated. "Which part of that did you not get?"

Erica rolled her eyes upwards. "Didn't you tell me that if you got cold feet to ignore you? I figured you were lying because your bachelor gene had kicked in. Aren't you the one that said getting married was very important and it would make your mother very happy?"

"It will make her happy, Erica and when I told her I was thinking of proposing to you she wasn't happy, because she knew I didn't love you." Alec gave her an impatient look. "My mother wanted me to marry, but for love, or it wouldn't be real for her or me. I didn't

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understand that until now.”

“I see. I’m just supposed to change all my plans just because you changed yours? Fuck how I’m feeling or the embarrassment this is causing me and my family.”

“Erica I would understand where you were coming from if you loved me,” Alec huffed.

“Alec, are you really that blind? I do love you. I only agreed to go along with your foolish ideas of us having an open marriage and such because I thought it was what you needed to be happy,” Erica cried.

Alec felt a twinge of regret for how he treated Erica. Now that he was in love with someone that obviously didn’t return his feelings he realized that his behavior towards Erica was a bit harsh. He didn’t want to hurt her.

“Erica, I’m sorry,” he apologized. “If I’d known, I would never have suggested we get married.”

The silence stretched between them and Alec pressed the button to the engine cutting on the heat in the car.

“Who is she? Do I know her?”

He looked at her as she wiped away a tear with a gloved hand. He didn’t think he’d ever seen Erica cry since he knew her.

“I don’t see what difference it will make by knowing who she is,” Alec murmured.

“It makes a difference to me,” Erica stated. “Women like to know their competition. You aren’t the easiest man to make fall in love with you and I would like to know what this woman has that I don’t?”

“Erica, this is not some contest and I’m not a prize up for barter, even though I’ve felt like one over the years.” His spread hands gripped the steering wheel. “I’ve been an inconsiderate bastard for far too long and I’ve changed. I want more. I have all of this and no one to share it with or I should say no one I wanted to share it with until now.”

He grinned, his mind deep in thought. “Being in love is like something I never expected. When I look at her I see us thirty years from now and I see children.”

He chuckled at Erica’s skeptical look.

“She must be something, if she has you thinking like this,” she said reluctantly.

“She is, to me.”

“Alec, please. I want to know who she is,” Erica beseeched.

Alec hesitated and realized it was pointless. It was just a matter of time before he and Mary was sprinkled across the tabloids. Maybe it was best Erica didn’t find out at the same

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time everyone else did. She deserved more from him.

“I’m in love with Mary, Erica,” he admitted.

“No way!” Erica shook her head and released a bitter laugh. “You choose that fat black cow over me? My goodness, Alec, have you gone fucking insane? The media is going to rip her to pieces. Not to mention your professional and personal reputation will be affected by this. What can you possibly be thinking? What do your parents think?”

“Don’t insult Mary, she is a good person. Better then you and me put together.” He maintained his affability, but there was a distant harshness in his eyes as he turned his stare on her. “It doesn’t matter what anyone thinks about us, it’s my business and I have enough money that if I lose clients because of it, then my franchise will go on. I was thinking of retiring and return to something else I love doing.”

When she didn’t say anything he continued, “As far as my parents are concerned they want me to be happy and I am or I will be if she will have me. You coming here may have ruined any leeway I may have made with her.”

“Mary, simply will not fit in our world, darling,” Erica said with disapproval. “Do you think it would be smart to take her out of the simplistic world where she can dress up in holiday costumes and bake cookies to give out?”

“Hell, I don’t fit your world.” Alec shrugged his broad shoulders. “Every since high school I pretended to be the kid that had everything. The All-American, excelling in all that I did, dated all the right girls, and hung with the right crowd. It worked for me, but now I’m getting old and I’m ready to settle down. I’m too fucking tired to keep up the façade. You didn’t even know I dress up like a elf and visit the local orphanage to give out gifts.”

“I find this entire conversation hard to believe,” Erica scoffed. “I’m thinking any minute now you are going to tell me there is cameras in the car and this is some sick “car confession” show?

“Why is this so hard for you to grasp? Because I’m rich?” Alec asked. “Take away the money and expensive toys and you will see a small town boy who grew up in Florida. I drove a second hand car, bagged groceries, and painted to put myself through school. Unlike you, my money was hard earned and a lot of luck. You were born into your wealth. Never had to lift a finger unless you wanted to. How are you at keeping a house without a slew of servants? I’m thinking about settling down here on the ranch. I want to fill this place with laughter and children. Can you share this dream with me, Erica?”

“Paint what?” She keyed in on one word. “Houses?”

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He briefly wondered if she was trying to sidestep his question about having lots of children. He knew why Erica really never wanted children and had conceded to have only one. She was selfish about her space and time and not as giving and loving as, *his* Mary.

"As a matter-of-fact I do help paint houses in a Community Outreach Program, I belong to, Erica," Alex admitted and snorted at the surprise look on her face. Did she really think he was truly as shallow as she was? Why hadn't he realized before that she had never asked him about his private life? All they had in common was their love for late night parties and drinks with all the mover and shakers of Seattle. Other than that, what did he really know of what Erica did when they weren't out together?

"Well, that's fine as long as you don't expect me to do the same," Erica said.

"Erica," Alec released a long heavy sigh. "I'm a normal guy. Who happens to not have to worry about paying the bills and unlike you, I wasn't born with a silver spoon in my mouth and some of my family values are still a part of my life. The fact that you don't know anything about "

"I know, I'm sorry," she grimaced. "Everything I say to you today seems to be the wrong thing to say."

"It's okay, because we both know there isn't anything left to agree about," Alex stated. "But I was speaking of painting portraits and some day I plan on taking up sculpting," Alec explained not sure why he was bothering. Erica would never understand.

"You painted portraits?" She eyed him as if he had developed a third eye in the middle of his forehead. "You're kidding right? Why didn't you tell me this before?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "You never seemed interested in anything other than the Mercer Advertising franchises."

"What about daddy? Once we married, he had hoped you would trust him enough to oversee a percentage of your firms," she reasoned.

"I'm sure he was and it would never happen, Erica." Alec shook his head. "I know how your father do business and I don't agree with it. He is overbearing and greedy. My people would never work under him, I would have a mutiny on my hands."

"With my father running thing, we'd have more money then, God," Erica exaggerated. "My father is a good business man." Her lips puckered with annoyance.

"What the hell kind of logic is that?" Alec balked. "God doesn't need money and I resent the comparison, for there isn't any. Just in case you haven't realized this yet, let me enlighten you, sweetheart. Your father is a crook who skimmed his taxes." Alec snapped

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and his eyes narrowed on her mottled face, her anger at his words apparent and for once he didn't give a damn. "The truth is you're father is broke after the IRS eats his assets and he wants you to marry me in hopes that he can transfer his pride holdings to you and my accounts before the government seizes everything."

Alec paused his eyes narrowing suspiciously on her face, when she remained quiet. "Oh damn, I'm not telling you anything you didn't already know, am I? You knew your father was about to lose everything. That's why you agreed to marry me regardless of the fact that you don't really love me. Was it because I was the highest bidder or the only one that was stupid enough to ask?"

Erica huffed. "This is a give and take world, you either join in or be left in the dirt. You're nothing unless you learn how to work the system."

"At the end of the day you're not any better then any of the countless women I've dated over the years. You know, the women you called whores, the ones that screw me for wealth or fame. So what does that make you? Are you better because you were born a rich girl and now you fuck me to save, Daddy?" Alec accused.

"I always knew you were a son-of-a-bitch!" She lifted her hand to strike him and he caught her wrist in his hand. "Unhand me you...you *fat* loving bastard!" Erica snarled. "Don't look so surprised everyone knows you have a secret infatuation for fat women."

"Say what you will Erica but if you move to hit me again, I'll forget I'm a *fucking* gentleman!" He released his hold on her wrist.

She must have taken him serious for her shoulders drooped in quiet defeat.

"I never intended to come here and create a scene," she said. "You were very vague in your message and I thought I deserved to at least know why you had changed your mind."

Alec was never one for knowing the right thing to say to women and this moment wasn't any different. In the end he figured telling her what he was feeling was the best way to go.

"Erica, since my brother died, I didn't think I was capable of feeling anything anymore. I've been walking through my life in a state of numbness doing what was expected to me. Trying to live my life and my brother's at the same time. It was as if I tried to pack a year of living into a day, not caring who's feelings I stepped on to get that rush of feeling alive. My mother wanted me to marry and settle down and at first I wanted to do it to get her off my back." He explained. "I made up my mind to treat marriage as another production contract...and boom! Love came along and kicked me in the gut." Alec grinned.

Shaking his head in stunned disbelief he continued, "This wonderful crazy feelings of

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stupid happiness is more than I could ever imagined. Forgive me, but I'm grabbing it with both hands. I can only wish that you will find the same thing." He explained as openly and honest as possible.

Alec knew he wouldn't be able to get her to understand. This was something she would have to experience for herself. It was hard to believe there was a time he truly thought he would be contented to marry for all the wrong reasons.

"What do you expect me to say Alec? Congratulation?" She asked angrily. "I can't do it. Do you have any idea the public humiliation I will be going through once this hits the news?"

"You will handle it as beautifully and graceful as you always have, Erica and once the media get news of your father's financial problems, we will become old news, quick. Still, if you want to make me out to be the bad guy, feel free to do so, I no longer care what anyone thinks of me and my image hasn't been all that great in the first place. The only thing I realized is, this is the only life I have and it's mine to live. I can't bring my brother back, no matter how much fast living I do."

"Okay, I can play off breaking up when the woman is at least in my league. But this! Dammit Alec, you've dumped me for an obese black woman that is named Mary, fucking, Christmas!" Erica pouted.

"There is nothing else to say about this." His voice was quiet, yet held an undertone of aloof disdain. "Do you have luggage inside?"

"Yes, but, I can't go back in there. I can never face that woman again," she mumbled blowing her nose on Kleenex she removed from Alec's car glove compartment.

"Stay right here and I will go get them. I will drive you back to Seattle." Alec announced before opening the door and slid from the SUV.

Making his way into the house he paused at the staircase. He desperately wanted to go and speak with Mary, but he knew she probably wouldn't even allow him inside her room and what he had to say to her couldn't be said with a locked door between them. The next time he saw her he was going to push all the doubts she had built up in her mind and make his intentions clear.

Determined, Alec turned away from the stairs. He knew he wasn't going to be able to pull this off without help. It was time that he pooled his resources. He already had his father on standby, just in case he needed help and if there were ever a time he needed help it was this one.

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“George!” He called out, seeing him moving about in the kitchen. If the older man had heard him, he wasn’t letting on. With a tired ragged sigh strolled into the kitchen with hands on his hips. “Hey, didn’t you hear me calling you?”

“Yup,” George answered nonchalantly.

Alec moaned and rolled his eyes, moving his arms from his hips and crossing them over his chest bracing himself for what he knew was to come. George must have spoken to Mary. *Damn*, he didn’t need this aggravation. “Okay, *Old Man*, what’s eating you?”

“Al, I’ve known you’ve since you were a boy,” he said unnecessarily. “You’re like a grandson to me and I can’t tell you how disappointed I am in you at this moment.”

“George--”

The other man lifted his hand to halt him, “Let me speak my peace and then you can have the floor,” he interrupted. “Your grandmother is one of my closest friends and I know she raised you to respect and honor women.” George fingered his long white beard his bushy eyebrows connecting in deep thought. “Now, what you’ve been doing, especially since your brother died is just plumb wrong. I don’t know where you get off, bringing a new woman out here year after year, using her, breaking her heart, and ushering her out of here before your family and friends arrive like so much garbage. It just ain’t right I tell ya.”

“Sorry George, I’m pushing for time.” Alec scowled. “Please, save the lecture and get to the point.”

“The point is you hurt Mary, and that was a lousy gosh dang thing to do. Seeing this girl wasn’t like the others, I thought you brought her here because, well you might be thinking of settling down. You even took her to visit Ava! I thought that meant she was the one!” He roared his piercing blue eyes unmoving on his face.

“Hold down your voice, I don’t want Mary to hear you. She’s already been through a lot of emotional upheaval the last couple of days.” Alec shifted on his feet and cleared his throat. He felt as if he was ten years old again.

“Whose fault is that?”

Alec chose to ignore the snide remark. “If you must know, you weren’t wrong. Mary is different. As a matter-of-fact, I’m in love with her and all of this has been some big stupid misunderstanding.”

“Good to hear,” George stated. “Now what are you going to do about this mess you’ve made?”

“I’m going to make things right, but not until I return. I have to run Erica back to Seattle

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and I need you to watch over Mary, for me.”

“You have forty-eight hours, to convince the young lady, you’re worth lovin’,” George mumbled looking into his coffee cup before turning it up to his lips.

“Forty-eight hours,” Alec’s eyes narrowed. “What are you saying?”

“I promise to that sweet girl back to Seattle.”

Alec released a soft string of curses. The fearful image of Mary leaving him forever entered his mind and he felt a lurch in the pit of his stomach. “I would ask you to run Erica home, but I hurt her too and at the very least I need to make sure she gets home safely.”

The older man sighed and looked at him once more. “You know, Al, I believe you’re sincere and you have my support, but I’m a man of my word. If you don’t change Mary’s mind I’m going to take her home because she asked me.”

“Fine,” he snapped. “I promise you by the end of this day Mary will not be wanting to leave me. Just make sure she eats something and watch over her for me.” Alec’s face split into a wide smile. “She’s very precious to me, George.”

George smacked his back and squeezed his shoulders. “Then you best get and drive that Fontaine woman out of here. You can’t get her away fast enough for me. I’ve haven’t been able to get a thing done since she arrived early this morning. Gosh darn, high and mighty actin’ woman, was giving me orders as if she ran the place. Talking about you dodging a bullet with that one.” He chuckled shaking his pale head. “I swear if you had married her, your wedding day would have been the first day of my retirement.”

“Come on George, we’re like family,” Alec laughed. “You would have left me high and dry like that?”

“Sure enough,” he nodded. “I would have went and helped out your grandmother run the bed and breakfast.”

“Speaking of, when are you going to make a honest woman of Mummo?”

“I asked, she said she only had one husband and would until the day she died. So, I take what I can get and at our age, it’s rightly enough.”

“Well I want Mary as my wife, and I’m not giving up until I get a yes,” Alec murmured.

“Is that so? Well you going to have to do something mighty desperate to wipe those tears of hurt from that girl’s eyes.”

“Don’t worry, I am desperate and what I have planned is something from your old book of courting.

“Get her pregnant?”

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“Crossed my mind, but she’s on birth control.”

“Yeah, my “old book of courtin’” needs to be updated.” George snickered. “So what is the plan?”

“No time to tell, if I want to get back before midnight I need to get this done. I also have to discuss something with Erica’s father and hopefully all feathers will be smoothed back down.”

“Where did you place Erica’s luggage?”

“As close to the door that I could put them without actually setting them outside on the front porch.” George deep timbered voice answered. “Look in the hall coat closet.”

“You knew she wasn’t staying,” Alec said in wonder. “You didn’t even place them in one of the guess rooms.”

“Nope, I didn’t know,” he corrected. “I hoped.”

Alec laughed and went to load up Erica’s things, but first he needed to call Ally to get the ball rolling.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Mary didn't know what to think once she found out that Alec had left with Erica. How could one man be so insensitive? He hadn't even tried to speak with her before he left. It seemed he was making himself clear, he got what he wanted from her and now he was going back to what was best for his public image. Then why bring up love? She didn't ask him to say those words to her. She didn't ask him to give her hope. So why the hell had he said all those wonderful things to her. It wasn't necessary when she had already decided to make him her lover.

The only thing she knew for sure, was once he said the words she definitely needed more than anything for it all to be true. She loved him dearly and maybe if she had told him so, Erica wouldn't have been able to sway him in to going away with her.

She had waited like an idiot for him to come after her and tell her everything she needed to hear. Mary sniffled as her mind raced with many possible scenarios each being worse than the last. The worse being Alec and Erica going to the same hotel they had shared? His hands and mouth doing all those insanely wonderful things to her body that he had done to her.

Mary huffed angrily. The picture she had in her mind didn't fit Alec when he was with the socialite. She couldn't see the woman she met standing in her fur coat in the quaint little inn. It was nice, cozy and clean, just like her. Erica was more of a Ritz Carlton dame.

"Nothing less then six hundred count sheets for me, *dahhhhhling*," Mary mimicked her amusement dying on a sob. "How did my life become such a mess? Was yesterday just a dream?"

The dull ache in her muscles and the stinging sensation when she urinated told her that yesterday was not a dream. It had been real and so were her feelings for this man. She couldn't imagine anyone else kissing or touching her.

With full arms, she managed to grasp the baby soft hand-knitted throw that Mummo had gifted to her. She was happy to see Alec had removed it from the car and brought it into the house along with the shopping bag of her dirty clothes and bath accessories he had purchased

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for her for their impromptu stay at his grandmothers. She supposed he wanted to make sure she had it to take with her when she left. Surely things couldn't end this way. He had to speak with her one more time before she went home.

Oh goodness! I'm going to have to find another job, she thought. There was no way she could work in the same building with Alec as he made wedding plans with Erica. What if as his assistant, they would expect her to hand-address their invitations? That would be horrible. Maybe this would be a good time to take Allison up on her job offer.

Dressed in flannel blue Snoopy printed pajamas, a tattered thick yellow robe, and matching Snoopy-head house slippers Mary made her way to the media room. Her arms were brimming with junk food fare from the kitchen pantry. She was delighted that George kept a well-stocked kitchen. There was everything a girl could hope for to drown her sorrows.

Mary placed the plastic bottle of cola, a bowl of microwave popcorn, a squeezable container of butter, and movie size box of Sugar Baby candy on the black leather sofa beside her. She curled up on the sofa and pulled Mummo's throw over her lap, it somehow gave her a sense of comfort. With a grunt she leaned over and picked up the remote from the side table, and hit the remote to turn on the television.

Reaching for the bowl of popcorn she stashed it between her legs and poured the Sugar Baby candies into it, shaking the bowl to mix it together. While she ate with one hand she used the remote to flip channels with the other. She was on the hunt for the Christmas movie, *It's a Wonderful Life* on television. It always made her feel hopeful and thankful for all the things she did have instead of angry about the things she didn't.

As she stopped on what looked to be a news channel she put the remote down long enough to unscrew the top from her soda. Mary heard Alec's name mentioned and looked up in time to see a picture of Alec smiling and dressed in a tuxedo, taken at some event or other splashed across the screen.

She sniffled and yelled at the TV, "Gorgeous, prick!" Picking the remote back up she hit the volume button to turn up the sound:

"Yes you heard right America. Millionaire playboy bachelor, Alec Mercer, is getting married and the rumors are thriving on who the lucky woman will be. Some are even placing bets online as to who this mystery bride is!"

"Maybe I should place a bet, I know who it is," Mary pouted. "Erica fuckin' Fontaine,

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people,” she bellowed foolishly at the television as if the news anchorwoman could hear her.

“What we do know as fact is, arrangements are being made for a New Years Eve wedding. What a way to start the coming year, America! Our reliable source tells us the wedding location is a closely guarded secret and Alec Mercer is walking on cloud nine.

“I don’t know about you but I can’t wait to find out which one did Alec choose out of his stable of beauties. I suppose we should look for the woman sporting the rumored six-carat heart-shaped diamond and ruby ring he was seen purchasing today. It is said to be the second ring he’s purchased in the past month, so what’s really going on here? Two fiancée’s or maybe it’s a Christmas present for the bride-to-be. Either way we aren’t letting this go. No way, no how! We are intrigued! So America, stay tuned. Once we find out what’s going on at the Mercer camp, you will be the first to know. Now moving on...”

Mary turned the sound down, and resisted the urge to throw the remote across the room. This was not how she wanted to spend her weeks before Christmas. Damn Alec for giving her hope. She thought this was going to be the best holiday of her life and now it was turning out to be the worst.

Why was she surprised, she went into this week thinking Erica was going to be his future wife. Even though he told her he wasn’t going to marry Erica and that he loved *her*, he had every right to change his mind. She loved him enough to not resent him for doing what he felt was necessary for his happiness. She had just hoped after last night she was the one that could make him happy. But how would he know that when she hadn’t even told him she loved him in return. All of this was her fault. She should have taken Mummo’s sage advice and told Alec how she’s felt about him for years.

They would be glad to know Alec was marrying a real bitch. She will give them a bonus but tell them how wonderful, loving, tender and sweet he was in bed.

With a sob, Mary grabbed her bowl of popcorn Sugar Baby candy mixture once more and squeezed butter on top of the contents. Depressed, she proceeded to eat and cry.

Setting the bowl aside Mary blew her nose on a napkin and reached for the cell phone

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she tucked in her robe pocket before leaving the upstairs bedroom. Mary speed-dialed her parent's number hoping to get a progress report on her father and girl-talk with her mom.

After five rings, it was the machine that picked up. Mary looked at the clock on the fireplace mantel noting it was nearly 9:00 pm. She wondered where they could be and hoped her father didn't have to go to the hospital.

"Mom? Dad? If you're home could you pick up please, I need to talk with you." She paused a moment. "Okay, I'll try your cell phones and left a message and now you're not at home." She sighed into the phone. "If I don't reach you, I'm coming home the day after tomorrow, so whoever get this message first, if dad is worse please call me on my cell phone and let me know. I'm beginning to worry. I love you and I'll check back if I haven't heard from you soon."

Mary clicked the cell phone close. The tears were coming earnestly, she didn't remember ever feeling this lonely before. She pushed the stray frizzed hair that had fallen from her twisty band behind her ears and blew her nose balling the napkin in her fingers.

"I'm all alone and I should be at home buying and wrapping presents with my family. I'm here in the middle of nowhere and Alec doesn't want me...nobody wants me," Mary wailed. "Nobody cares about me." Shoving her used napkin in her pocket and sobbed into her hands."

"That is so not true, Ms. Mary Christmas. I know for a fact that you have several people that care for you.

At the sound of his voice, she lifted her head to find Alec standing over her. "Alec? What are you doing here?"

"Last time I checked, I lived here," he crooned smoothly.

"Humph! Shouldn't you be with Erica planning your New Years Eve wedding?" Mary said accusingly, looking down at her clenched hands. It was too painful to look at his handsome face. He was so calm and contented, while she look and felt like an utter mess. He could have at least looked as shitty as she felt.

"Ah, that didn't take long to hit the news, I see. Well that's a good thing, I called in a lot of favors to leak the story seeing how it was at the last minute."

Alec took a seat on the couch next to her and she still couldn't look at him. Instead she tried to put some space between them, but the cad was knowingly sitting on the tail of her robe. She was pinned by his side.

He had a huge sectional sofa, why did he have to sit close enough for her to smell his

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familiar manly scent, mixed with his favorite aftershave. She knew his smell as well as her own, especially now that they had been intimate. His scent was tame compared to the arousing aroma of his heated flesh during hot and heavy sex. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath before opening them with a soft groan.

“You could have saved me some popcorn. I’ve been running ragged all day and haven’t eaten since Mummo fed us early this morning. God, I’m exhausted.” Alec washed a hand over his face and she could see the tired dark rings around his beautiful green eyes, after meeting his grandmother she could see the likeness. Like hers, his eyes were kind, loving and—*No! I can’t be thinking like this. He has lying eyes. He never really loved me.*

“Go away Alec, I want to be alone,” she shouted at him. “I don’t want to hear anything else you have to say.”

Alec blew out his breath in a whoosh and said, “If I’m not mistaken, when I arrived, wasn’t that what had you upset? You felt unloved and alone, crying your beautiful eyes out. You’re even fogging up your glasses.” He reached out and removed them from her face.

“I’m not crying!” She slapped at his hands but it didn’t stop him. He eased her glasses onto the table.

She felt naked without her glasses, especially in her vulnerable state. Alec was watching her so intensely she winced.

“Sweetheart, your nose is red and your cheeks are damp and flushed, it’s obvious you’ve been crying.”

“Standing out in the cold at the park yesterday and today while your fiancée filled me in on all your plans has given me a cold.” She cleared her throat.

“So regardless of the time we spent together and my telling you I loved you, you believed that I could hurt you this way.” He stated more as a fact than a question.

“I told you I didn’t want to hear anything you had to say!”

Mary shrugged out of her robe and threw aside the throw across her legs. She left everything pinned beneath his jean-clad thighs and stood. She needed to get away from him. Having him so close drained her of all reasons. She walked over to the fireplace and stared at its flames.

Look at me Mary,” he ordered.

She could feel him standing close behind her. Mary couldn’t help but to do his bidding. She loved looking at him, even when it was at the office from a distance.

His fixed stare was as soft as a caress causing a tingling in the pit of her stomach. He

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was so disturbing to her in every way. The smoldering flame she saw in his eyes startled her. How could he choose to marry another woman and look at her this way?

“Sweet Mary, the time for games and misunderstandings are over. At the rate we’re going we’ll both end up blowing the best thing that has ever happened to either of us.”

“Speak for yourself,” she muttered.

She saw the hint of a smile twitching at the corner of his mouth and narrowed her eyes at him, daring him to laugh or make fun while she was in a state of misery. He stole her heart, slept with her and declared undying words of love...well, maybe not undying, but he said the words.

“Mary, I’m sorry. I’m sorry for arguing with you last night, for expecting you to tell me you loved me just because I said it first and I’m not surprised after the stunt Erica pulled that you don’t trust me, that is if you ever really did. I’m not so sure.”

“I can’t believe I was going to apologize to you before we got out of the car. I was going to tell you that I loved you since the first time I saw you! Boy, what a fool I’ve been to not listen to my instincts.”

“You love me?” His eyes widened in surprise. “Mary--”

“Don’t you touch me,” she warned holding out her hand to stop him. “I did love you, but not anymore. It’s over!”

When she lifted her eyes to glimpse his reaction, she saw the hurt on his face.

“I knew you would say that.” Alec removed his cell phone from the clip at his waist.

Mary glared at him warily, wondering what he was up to.

“What are you doing?” A growing suspicion wrenched at her gut as she saw the new look of determined on his face.

“The only thing I know that I can to make you understand how much you mean to me. Before we leave this room, Mary, you will know that it’s you that I love and only you.”

“Alec--”she began.

“Nope, it’s too late to turn back now, so be quiet. Can’t you see I’m on the phone?”

“Humph!” Mary scowled crossing her arms across her breast and tapping her Snoopy clad feet against the wooden floor.

Alec’s dancing eyes traveled downward and he snorted with mirth before speaking into the phone at his ear. “Hello how did it go? Yes, I tried to reason with her, but she is too stubborn for her own good.”

“I’m--” Mary clamped her lips shut as he narrowed his most sinful gaze on her breast

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that were visible from the opening of the top two buttons of her pajamas. She huffed and fisted her collar close.

He had the nerve to give her a sweeping smile that touched her all the way to her feminine core. *Damn his hide. He's sexy as hell and knows it.*

"I'm afraid we're going to have to move on to plan "B". Yes, you were right, Mary didn't swoon all over me when I got here as I hoped she would." Alec winked at Mary.

"As if!" She murmured rolling her eyes at him.

"I know I owe you dinner at the most expensive restaurant in Seattle." He spoke gruffly into the phone. Once again his eyes stole to her feet and back up to her face. Chuckling and shaking his head he placed his hand over the mouth of the phone. "You look absolutely adorable."

"Liar, you know I look awful," she blurted and hated the fact that he could make her smile with just the simplest words.

"Yeah, I'm sure I want to do this. It's the only way. Thanks, I knew I could depend on you." Alec closed his phone and clipped it back at his waist.

"What was that about?" Mary inquired.

"Are you willing to hear me out, now?" Alec lifted his hands and smoothed strands of hair off her face and behind her ear. The flat of his fingertip teased the outline of her ears.

She felt herself swaying into his touch and caught herself, brushing away his hands like an irritating bug. "Stop that. I will listen to you, but if you going to tell me what I already know, then I prefer to pack up my snacks and turn in for the night."

"Mary, I have never told a woman besides my Mother and Mummo that I loved her. So it isn't words I throw around casually." Alec reasoned. She listened. "Mary, this hasn't been some big ploy to get you into my bed."

"I know that," she scowled.

"You do?" His usually deep voice cracked in surprise.

"Of course, I came to your office, you didn't come to me," she reminded.

"Yeah, it took me awhile to realize it was you because you walked pass my off for the past two years and not once came in to see me personally. I was so stressed and when I saw you, all I could see was you being your usually kind self and the sudden answer to all my problems...my Christmas angel in the flesh. Owen had sung your praises over the years and I thought this would be a win for the both of us. You know the business and you've worked on contracts before..."

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Mary released a long sigh before saying, "Is this going somewhere?"

She already knew all of this and he was right, she took a chance and did something she never had the nerve to do before. She went to him. She desired to see if he was as handsome up close as he seemed to be on television and from afar or was it all smoke and mirrors. He was even more handsome in person and in spite of her giving him a hard time she was secretly delighted that he needed her help. It would mean getting to know him better and finding out more about him as a person and she had. Now she loved him because in actuality he was a wonderful man.

It was her own doubt in her attractiveness that had stopped her from going into his office years ago. It was those same fears that made her think she couldn't hold her own against Erica Fontaine and stayed to fight for her man. Mary knew she could speak a confident game, but it was a lie. Her current need to believe Alec had failed her, proved that she hadn't thought she was attractive enough to hold on to him and it was easier to push him away than to be wrong.

A stab of guilt pained her heart.

"I can see that mind of yours working overtime," he released a loud groan and cursed. "Damn it, Mary, can't you look at me and tell how crazy I am for you?"

Yes, she could see it and she could feel it too, but she assumed all of it was her own turbulent emotions for him and was reading things into every kind word he gave her, every long look, and lingering kiss. She never felt like Homely Mary when he looked at her. She felt loved, adored and as beautiful as any supermodel or socialite.

Mary reached up and touched his face. "I'm sorry," she murmured. Her eyes shimmering with emotion, "I made a mistake by placing my insecure feelings from years of living with my scars and people talking about my weight. I was blinded to the fact that it wasn't an act for you. You really think I'm beautiful."

She could see he was amazed by her comment. "You're more than beautiful, you still my breath way," he smiled. His hands eased around her neck and he tugged her towards him, she went into his arms willingly. "Tell me sweetness, did I make love to you like a man who thought you were ugly and doing you a favor? Hell, I was the one that was weeping like a baby when I came."

Mary laughed aloud and shook her head. "You are crazy? Do you really know what you are getting into? Once I give all my love to you, you aren't going to know how to handle all that love. We big girls love hard."

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"Trust me, I give as well as I get," he assured her. "Mary, say you will stay with me."

Mary didn't have time to respond before the anxious assault of his mouth on hers made her forget why she had been angry with him. The exquisite padding of his lips stole her breath and set her body aflame. Anticipation rode her hard and she couldn't seem to get close enough.

Panting hard Alec was the first to break the kiss. "I love you. I love you. I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life showing you how precious you are to me. Please say you will let me," he begged.

She couldn't say anything. She was scared she had eaten herself into a Sugar Baby comma, passed out on the couch, and was having the sweetest dream ever.

"Tell me I'm not dreaming," she blew against his lips.

"You're not dreaming." He said. "Mary, I love you," he declared once more while sweeping his sweater off over his head, dropping it to the floor. "Say it," he murmured in between wet loud kisses.

Alec's fingers made quick work of the buttons on the front of her pajama top, pushing it off her round shoulders onto the floor. He unhooked her bra and let it drop. Her heavy brown breasts appeared bathe in a toasty glow from the light of the fireplace.

"Oh, Alec." Mary moaned arching her neck to the side as he sprayed her throat with hot breathy kisses.

"I want to hear you say it Mary." He held her face in his hands and moved his lips over hers devouring any words she had to say with his searing kiss.

"Alec," she whispered. "I love you. I always have."

He took her face in his hands and held her still. "Marry me, Mary."

"Okay," she nodded with big tears in her brown eyes.

"Yes? Did I hear you say, yes?"

She nodded again, laughing happily beneath her tears. "I probably will wonder why I said yes, after I'm able to think clearly, but at this moment I can't think of anything I want more than to be your wife, Alec."

"Oh, God, Mary...Mary!" He laughed out and picked her up swinging her around in circles. "Why...I mean...why so you believe me, now?"

Mary laughed and slid down his body until her toes touched the ground. "Because you told me you love me."

"I've said it before." He stared at her warily as if he was the one needing the

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convincing. "Tell me what I did right this time so I will know to do it often in the future."

Mary beamed. "Alec, look at me. I mean really look at me. If you can still love me at my worst, then you're either blind as a bat and not telling me or you really must love me."

"I suppose I do, because you look good enough to eat." He laughingly swooped in to seize her mouth once more. Greedily and needy they peeled off the remaining clothing that kept them from laying their hands on the other's naked flesh.

Alec took Mary's hand and dropped to the white fur rug in front of the fireplace. She watched his hard perfect ass as he crawled over and dragged the throw his grandmother had given her from the sofa. Coming back to her side he eased down beside her and drew the covers over them.

Mary welcomed him as he moved over her leg to lie between her legs, spreading them wide with his hips. With ease her knees came up and her legs wrapped naturally around his hips.

"I've thought about this all day," he smiled brilliantly.

"So have I," she admitted as relief coursed through her.

Mary groaned with pleasure. Her heart was pounding and the sound in her ears was like a rushing storm. Their bodies slid against each other and she pressed kisses to his skin, nipping at his flesh as her excitement grew. She moaned his name and he covered her open mouth with his.

She shifted her position and took him by surprise managing to turn him onto his back, she climb on top of him. Bracing her hands on his chest, she grinned down at him and slowly lowered herself on his hard cock.

His hands went to her hips to hold her. "You...you're sure you ready for this?"

She nodded, "Oh yeah." Mary hissed as her body put up a mild protest by the deep intrusion. For a moment she waited, impaled allowing her vaginal muscles to adjust. She was still tender but it was such pleasurable pain, she couldn't stop if she wanted to. "I really like this position," she manage to say before lifting and lowering herself with the help of his hands at her waist.

"Aaaaaah!" Alec gasped and cursed. "Fuck, you feel so good. If it's too much let me know."

"Don't you dare stop," Mary whimpered. She leaning over him until her breast was pressing flat into his chest giving her free access to nibble and kiss his shoulders.

"I couldn't if my life depended on it," Alec grunted and gripped the cheeks of her ass

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spreading it wide.

“”Young man if you don’t unhand my daughter you aren’t going to have much of a life left! What the hell is going on here?” A loud voice boomed like cold water thrown on two rutting dogs in heat.

Mary squealed and slid off Alec, gripping the throw cover in her fist. Alec sat up, making sure nothing was showing. He had the nerve to grin at the four mottled faces looming in the doorway of the media room.

“Hello, Mr. Christmas, Mrs. Christmas, good to see you again.” When her father didn’t return his greeting, he cleared his throat “Mom...Dad.”

“Oh, Alec!” Nessa Mercer placed her hands over her face, shaking her head.

“Stop grinning.” Mary scowled at Alec, holding the quilt in place up over her breast. “Daddy, err...it’s good to see you’re feeling better. I was worried, you had been placed in the hospital.”

“Yeah, I can see how worried you were,” he murmured. “Trying to give me a heart attack just in case the flu didn’t kill me.”

Mary blushed up to the roots of her mussed hair. “Mommy, what are you doing here?” she asked thinking it was best not to address her father until he calmed down. He wasn’t having it. He had more to say.

“No, young lady.” Her dad boomed. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Don’t worry sir,” Alec piped in. “As I told you earlier today, I love Mary and I’m going to make an honest woman out of her. A little before you came in she agreed to marry me and well, I was extremely happy, as you can see.”

Mary turned and looked at Alec until he turned his own special shade of red and looked away, but for the life of her she couldn’t understand why he would be grinning like that during a time such as this. He had to be crazy as a loon.

“Young man. You’re lucky I didn’t bring my old service revolver.” Her father threatened. He was a force to be reckoned with. Well over six-feet-four and two hundred and sixty pounds, still very attractive for his years.

Mary was scared shitless but Alec was his usual calm self and why hadn’t he told her he went to visit her parents today? Did the man have no shame? “Alec, did you know they were coming up here?”

Alec shrugged sheepishly. “Well yeah, but I kind of...sort of...forgot.”

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously as his face and his ears were nearly purple they were

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so red. “You’re lying to me, I can tell.” Mary punched him on the shoulder. “You...were hoping this would happen, weren’t you?” She shrieked and punched him again. “Why would you do that?”

“Mary, I was desperate and I needed you to give me more time. I figured if you didn’t get past your stubbornness and accepted the fact that you loved me so I could propose to you. I knew that you said your family was old fashioned. So I figured that if your dad saw you compromised. You’d have to marry me.”

“If the man wants a “shotgun” wedding, just show me where to find one,” Mary’s father bellowed.

Mary ignored him. She was too busy looking at Alec. “I can understand being caught sleeping together but, we were...” she cut her eyes at their parents and felt her entire face blushing. “You know.”

“We weren’t supposed to get the chance to go this far, sweetheart. I called and if they had left right when I called, then we’d at least be partially dressed.”

For the first time Alec’s father spoke, “The uh...path from the bunk house was iced over, so George had to go easy.”

Alec lovingly caressed her cheek. “It doesn’t matter, the moment you told me you loved me, I went brain numb and when I touched you all thoughts of company coming was forgotten. I apologize to everyone, but I was anxious to make Mary see reason.”

“He was desperate, all right,” someone voice.

“Aw,” she cried, her eyes watering. “You do know you are the craziest Caucasian I’ve ever known, don’t you?” she crooned against his lips. But you’re my crazy White man so I will tell you this because I love you dearly. “If you ever pull another stunt like this, if my daddy don’t kill you, I just might.”

“He won’t be around because I’m killin’ him tonight. Enough of this...this...”

“This what Joseph Christmas. Stop acting like you’re clueless especially after the way you did it last night.” Mary’s mother grabbed her husband’s arms and leaned into him with an openly suggestive look.

“Mom! Miriam!” Joseph and Mary cried out in unison.

The room erupted in tension relieving laughter.

“Mary dear, you and Alec, get dressed before your father’s blood pressure goes through the roof.” Miriam took her husband by the arm to lead him away. “Come Joe, lets give the children some privacy.”

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"Privacy? Miri, if we leave them, there is no tellin' what he's going to do to my little girl."

"Looked like our little girl was doing all the doing," Miriam teased. "She took after her Momma after all."

Joe grinned and slapped her on the bottom playfully. "Woman, you must be forgettin' we got an audience too. My daughter first, now you trying to kill me."

Mary grinned. This was the way it has always been with her parents. She envied it and now she had the opportunity as such happiness. She couldn't wait to be Alec's wife.

"Don't worry Miriam, we aren't shy, as you can see by the behavior of my son. Forgive him for he knew exactly what he was doing. I don't agree with it, but I understand it." Retired Dr. Larson Mercer spoke up with a chuckle.

The older man turned one last time to his son, "Get dressed boy and bring Mary into the living room where we can get a proper introduction."

"Okay, Dad."

"Oh yeah, Son, way to go. It's good to see you're finally happy. It's all we ever wanted.

"Way to go? Joe mumbled gruffly. "What if that was your daughter. I--"

"We know, dear," Miriam and Nessa chided in unison interrupting his banter while, looking at each other and laughing.

"We're going to get along fine," Nessa smiled. "I've always wanted a daughter."

Mary and Alec watched in fascination as their parents chatted and disappeared into the foyer. "When did they meet, much less become friendly with each other?"

"I made some phone calls. The first one was when we first got here. I spoke to my mother and told her that her Christmas wish had come true. I found the woman I wanted to spend the rest of my life with."

"You knew it before we got here?" she gulped and grinned at him.

"Yes, I did," he admitted nuzzling his nose against hers. "I asked mother to make herself known to the Christmas', so they wouldn't be shocked when I spoke to them about marrying you. I wasn't sure how your parents would feel about me. I figured if they saw my parents were White they would put it together. When I took Erica back to Seattle I made a few stops before I returned."

"Oh, Alec."

I wouldn't have went through all of this trouble if you hadn't been so distrusting and

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stubborn.”

“I wasn’t.” Mary said as if she was truly affronted.

“Were to,” he gave her a quick peck.

“I can’t believe you would do all of this...for me.” Mary shook her head. “You know my Daddy could have killed you. Now, that was just stupid.”

“I love you and I would risk my neck to make you my wife.” He dipped his head and lightly bit her neck. “I hadn’t planned on our parents catching you raping me. But I’m learning after years of endless control that when it comes to you, sweet Mary, my little head is thinking overtime and my big head just follows instructions?”

“Hey,” she laughed. “I see the little head is talking again.”

His face grew serious. “Marry me New Years Eve, I don’t want to wait. He leaned away from her and dragged his discarded coat over to him. He removed a black velvet box from the pocket. “I picked this up for you today.”

“Let me guess.” She looked upward and placed a finger to his chin. “A six caret heart shape diamond and ruby ring.”

He looked taken aback. “How--”

“The media, of course.”

He laughingly shook his head. “Of course.” Opening the box he took hold of Mary’s hand and slid the ring on. It was a little snug and he assured they would go and get it fitted as soon as they returned home.

“They also said it was your second ring in a month,” Mary leaned into him.

“Well, I had brought one with me that I had picked out when I was thinking of marrying Erica and I realized that didn’t fit how I felt about you. So I didn’t feel right giving it to you. I also have one that has been in the family for years and passed on to me to give to my wife. I still want you to have that one to wear, but it just didn’t seem big enough to express how much I loved you. I wanted you to have one that was just yours, one that you could pass on to our daughter some day.”

“You beautiful silly man.” She kissed him. “You could have tied a string around my finger and I still would be yours, but I thank you for putting up with my doubts and fears. Also for going out of your way to prove how much you love me. I will never forget this moment.”

“I can’t believe you’ve been walking around the office hankering after me for the past two years. I wished you’d said something sooner, or at least walked into my office the first

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time I saw you outside my door,” he accepted her kisses.

“I wished I had too. We could have avoided all this confusion,” She kissed his chin and suckled on his bottom lip.

“I did pretty good in a pinch, didn’t I?” He offered his tongue to her. “You didn’t say if you’re available to marry me in a few weeks.”

“Well, we mustn’t disappoint the media,” she said playful allowing him to sweep her up into his arms and onto his lap.

They kissed hungrily. The booming sound of her father’s commanding voice echoed from the other room.

“Mercer, get my baby-girl in here right now, or you will need until next Christmas to heal. Forget the Honeymoon!”

“Mary?”

“Hmm?”

“How about I make a few calls and we hire a helicopter to take us back to Seattle and we catch a private plane ride to Las Vegas tomorrow.”

“Why?”

“Because, if your father expects me to keep my hands off of you until New Year’s eve, you’re looking at a dead man. I’m sneaking up to your room tonight and he will have to shoot me to stop me.”

“Don’t worry, baby. I’ll get on top again. He won’t shoot you if my big butt is in the way,” she assured him pulling his face back to hers.

Mary and Alec fell against each other in laughter, both realizing Christmas was so much better when you get what you wished for.

May you get all your Christmas wishes!

All I Want For Christmas



SHIREE MCCARVER

Interracial relationships with action, romance, humor and emotions rolled into one memorable tale has become a trademark of Alabama native, Shiree McCarver's novels. She learned a long time ago that laughter and dreams is necessary for daily survival. Ms. McCarver loves hearing from her readers. She can be reached at:

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Shiree McCarver

Other books by Shiree McCarver



SELBY MAISON has worked her way up from an orphan to a successful recording star. Only to find at thirty-five her career is fading, she has a failed marriage, and now can never have children. What's a girl to do?

DARIUS ANDROS is a shape-shifting Satyr from Ancient Greece. He is searching for a soul mate that can give him a family he so longs for. With one catch she must be a descendant of the Nymphs for it to work.

Can Selby accept the offer of undying love from Darius? To be immortal and be able to have children that would be half Satyr? Together they must face fears they both have and make a decision of life immortal or human.



Selby and Darius are getting married and trouble ensues... "I have no patients for men...especially Sylus de Gauls."

Lesbian, Entertainment Executive, Zaza Draper, has no patients for men in general. Therefore, as maid of honor in her best friend, Selby's, wedding it forces her to work closely with pompous best man, Sylus de Gauls.

"Human females bore me...especially Zaza Draper." Musician extraordinaire, Sylus de Gauls, thought after centuries of all kinds of women he could handle this *one*, but Zaza was more than one Satyr should have to deal with in a lifetime.

"It's physically impossible for a Satyr to love a human female!" Za and Sy are on a mission to find Selby's birth mother before the big wedding. As Sy learns Za's secrets, a forbidden love develops, bringing the forces of the Darkworld upon their

heads. Can love prevail or is death imminent?



Wolf biologist Sera Tibbs is attractive, smart, and respected in her field. She is also dying. When she decides to relocate to

Lake Tahoe to complete her research, she never dreamt she would encounter her soul mate in the midst of taking her last breathe she his rescued by a 6'4 virgin shifter who swears he is her fated lover and promises to save her from the illness

ravishing her body.

Impotent and colorblind, Lykian born werewolf, Justus Apollon has been tracking a serial killer for two centuries. Never, has he disregarded his duties; until, he unexpectedly encounters his 'weakness', Sera. In love, Justus discovers a world, of colors and passion, only to leave himself vulnerable to his enemy. Will Justus seduce Sera into becoming a she-wolf so she may live?

Will Sera choose immortality with Justus, only to risk dying in the vengeful hands of his adversary, once known as Jack the

Ripper? Justus will do anything in his power to keep Sera safe as he helps her come to grip with her role in his life



Lord Ethan Clare is his own man although his family and Queen are forcing him to do his duty and marry once again. He lost his first wife in childbirth and he really does not want to marry again. Ethan will do as he is asked even though he has fallen for another. He has made many enemies while working for his Queen. Now he has found the one for him and they are both tangled in a web of intrigue and deceit. Ethan has his hands full with the mysterious Sauda, his family duties and trying to discover who the leader of the Knights of Darkness is. Ethan is different from the rest of his family and he does not know why. Sauda is like no one he has ever met and he is willing to give everything up for their forbidden love.

Sauda Mauri is a trained assassin. She has been a slave and an assassin for many years and now she has a chance of freedom if she can complete her mission. She has run away from her master and is traveling under the disguise of Lady Francis's nursemaid so she can get her assignments and earn her freedom. She does not need a complication and Lord Ethan is more than determined to be just that. She will not let her emotions get the better of her; she has a job to do. Sauda will not be his mistress and can never be his wife. Will Sauda follow her heart or will she settle for being Ethan's mistress? Will Ethan forget family duties and take a chance with his forbidden love?



A Holiday Tale of two opposites realizing all they wanted for Christmas is the same thing...unconditional love.

All Alec wanted for Christmas was an assistant he wouldn't want in his bed.

Play-boy Advertising mogul Alec Mercer sees nothing wrong with mixing business and pleasure. That is until he discovers his ex-assistant had sabotaged his clients contract renewals, because of a broken heart. The mistake could have cost him millions in revenue. He swears he's going to straighten out his personal life. Starting with proposing to his on again off again socialite girlfriend Erica, and settle down.

All Mary wanted for Christmas was a man who could love her as she was.

Mary Christmas, yep...that's her name. She's a big woman with a big heart. She wears glasses and not too pretty but she's as jolly as the come. Working in an office full of beautiful slim women can be trying. Having a secret crush on the boss, Alec Mercer, was downright ridiculous. There was no way a guy like that could like someone like her, or so she believed. Now that Mary got her Christmas wish in the flesh, what is she going to do about it?

Together, they make Christmas wishes a reality...

What color is love? I dare you to dream outside the box.

www.shireemccarver.com

All I Want For Christmas



ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS

Shiree McCarver

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Shiree McCarver

Other books by Shiree McCarver

FOREVER MOONLIGHT

A SATYR'S TALE: ZAZA AND SYLUS

A SATYR'S TALE: SELBY AND DARIUS

THE LORD AND THE SCORPION

All I Want For Christmas

CHAPTER ONE

"I don't care if it's two weeks before Christmas! Somebody has to be working in this city this week, besides me. You think I can run this advertising firm, employing hundreds of people—forty percent being from your agency, I might add—and it be okay for me to take two fuckin' weeks off before Christmas?" He paused to listen to the party on the phone line and laughed aloud. "Okay, so *I am* taking two weeks off before Christmas, but hey, I take my work with me."

Alec Mercer rolled his eyes heavenward as Allison James of the James Beauty and Brains Employment Agency, tried to appease him. It wasn't working. "Look Allison, I know you've sent over four girls already, and I appreciate it; I really do. Still, all of them had that look in their eyes, like, they wanted to fuckin' eat me for dinner."

Alec scratched his head in frustration pausing long enough to hear the same detailed explanation she'd given him fifteen minutes ago. He understood it the first time, but he just didn't want to hear it or accept it because he was desperate. He was leaving the day after tomorrow, and he needed an assistant that didn't mind working during the holiday far away from home.

His cell phone shrilled, and he moaned pulling the phone from his inner blazer pocket with a soft curse. *I can't handle another problem today.* "Ally, hold a minute it's Mom, on the other line. Yeah, I'll tell her you said "Merry Christmas". Don't hang up on me! *We* are not finished yet."

Alec took a deep breath already knowing what this conversation was going to be about, what it was always about. "Hello Mom. Ally said, "Merry Christmas"," he said and repeated, "You went to church this morning, lit a candle for me, and made a Christmas Wish?"

He rolled his eyes skyward. "Do I need to ask what you wished for? Of course I don't, what else do you wish for every Christmas, since I got my first chest hairs?" Alec chuckled. "I'm not being a smart ass, Mother. Nevertheless, you make it seem like you're not happy with everything I've already accomplished, in my life and please, stop talking as if you're going to die

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tomorrow.”

Alec shook his head. He had a Christmas wish too, he needed someone to save him from this bad day...no, this bad month. This has always been the worse time of the year and for once he would love for it to be different than every other year.

“Well, you never know Mom, you may get what you hoped for this year. No mother not the marriage, but I can always bring home a babe or two,” he teased.

Alec laughed; his Mother didn't, which meant she's serious about what she wanted for this Christmas. She was ready for him to settle down, and she wanted to be a grandmother. It would take a bit to get the second, but on Christmas Eve when he proposes to Erica, she would get the first part of her wish.

Alec caught the tail end of what she was saying and replied, “Yes, I'll be leaving the day after tomorrow, and hopefully I'll have an assistant in tow. Either way, everything will be ready and cleaned up before everyone else arrives.”

God, don't start on Erica again. She did.

“No, Erica, is coming later with her parents.” He cleared his throat. “No, Mother, Erica doesn't mind helping me prepare the cabin, she's just swamped with charity events,” he lied.

Erica has never lifted a dust rag in her life, and she refused to do it, even for me. He thought, but didn't dare say it to his mother.

Alec rolled his eyes skyward. “Mom, be nice. I know how you feel about Erica and her parents; but please try to be civil, for me. Are you sure you and Dad don't want to ride up there with me?”

He closed his eyes and pressed in on the bridge of his nose.

“Okay, the weekend it is, tell Pop to drive safely.” Alec knew if he didn't interrupt her she would go on forever. “Mom, I love ya, but Ally is on the other line, and I'm desperate for an assistant. I'm drowning here. Yeah, I lost another Executive Assistant. Not now mother. I'll call you before I leave. Love you too...no I don't know Ms. Lane's daughter...yes, I heard you the first time...bye.”

He cursed softly. Great! He finally chose to marry the one woman with a similar temperament to him and his attentive mother couldn't stand her. Could anything else go wrong today? He cursed as he remembered Allison was on hold.

“Ally, look babe, you know me. I can't deny a pretty woman a roll in the hay, but she has to know that I'm not looking to marry her because of it. Yeah, I'm giving up my old ways. I'm finally going to settle down, and I believe Erica would be a good understanding wife. Why you call Erica a bitch? She comes from a good family. Her father is a man as driven as I am, and she

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can handle my workaholic mentality. However, I can't risk any bad publicity at this time."

Alec rubbed his temple with his fingers.

"I can appreciate your emphatic stance, but I didn't get in this mess alone Ally. You owe me big. I need someone, who is reliable and dedicated to her work; no more loose women looking for deep pockets. I needed an assistant like yesterday."

Alec paused and listened to Allison, his mouth dropped wide. "Did you just say you had an ex-Playboy centerfold, with a what cup size? Do those really exist? Now that's she graduated she's looking for a flexible job as an assistant? How flexible is she?"

He cocked an eyebrow at Allison's answer. "*Damn*, you weren't talking about *flexible hours*. I see."

Alec closed his eyes with a deep sigh. He had to stick to his plans, and he wasn't a kid fresh out of school, and had enjoyed his share of beautiful women. Still Ally was hitting him below the belt, and she knew it.

"How did I miss that you had a cruel streak after all these years?" He laughed at Allison's reply and caught himself. He had to remain serious and focused or he would never hear the end of it from his *about to be* fiancée Erica Fontaine. Okay maybe he should be calling Erica his fiancé, since in a few weeks, on Christmas Eve, they would be announcing it to their families.

If it weren't for his ailing mother and her persistent need for grandchildren, he would have remained one of *Society Magazine's* confirmed bachelors. Yet, since his brother's death his mother poured on the guilt readily.

Already his normal humdrum life was changing to suit another person's insecurities. Should he even be considering marrying a woman that didn't trust him?

In the end, isn't that why hiring a simple Jane assistant was so important to Erica? She didn't trust him to keep his hands to himself around a beautiful woman. Why are the gorgeous women the ones with the biggest insecurities?

"Look Ally, we've been best friends since pre-school, and you get all my business. So I need you to get on this...wait a minute someone is at my office door. I'll check back in tomorrow."

Alec placed the phone back on its cradle and shouted for the knocker to come in.

"Mr. Mercer, Mr. Owens told me to stop by and drop off these files before I left for the evening."

Alec whirled around in his high-back leather chair tearing his eyes away from the Seattle skyline. At least it wasn't raining. He thought absently. "Thank you..." He halted, his brow lifted in quiet surprise. This woman worked somewhere in his building? She had to be from a temporary agency because she definitely wasn't one of Ally's girls.

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In a short time, he summed her up; that was all the time, he needed to access the short heavyset black woman that entered his office with files in hands.

She was curvaceous, though, she was well into the plus sizes, but she wore it well and the brown calf length skirt with a matching linen jacket fit her roundness nicely. Her dark brown hair was pulled back tightly at the nape of her neck and not a hair out of place.

As he reached for the file she handed him, her pink tinted perfectly heart shaped lips curved into a smile revealing short spaced teeth. Her glasses slipped down her short round tipped nose, and he glimpsed very beautiful friendly eyes before she pushed them back up her nose.

"You're welcome Mr. Mercer." She smiled again. "Mr. Owens said if you had any questions you can call him at home. Have a *Merry Christmas!*"

She turned to leave and Alec found himself stopping her, his mind thinking crazy thoughts; except, hey, he was feeling desperate. "Wait! You're Mary, right?"

She turned her attention back to him and those lovely eyes locked with his. He saw through the glasses and saw that they were a warm brown; sort of like a puppy he once had and loved very dearly as a child. He didn't know her, but he liked her.

"Mary Christmas," she said.

Alec thought he had missed something while immersed in the warm fuzzy thoughts of his childhood pet.

"Pardon me." His head leaned to the side in question.

Her heavy jowls spread into a wider grin and he saw a dimple deepen on both sides of her mouth as she stuck out her hand and said. "My name is Mary Christmas."

Alec's green eyes widened at the young woman who stood before him, breaking the monotony of another humdrum day by her presence. "You're kidding me?"

"No Sir." Mary laughed. "I think the joke was on me, when I was born to parents who will do anything for a laugh. Trust me. I wasn't mentally scarred by it."

Alec couldn't help but grin at her humor and the sound of her voice and the endearing drawl. "You're from the south?"

"Oops." She prettily put a hand over her mouth as she giggled. Rolling her eyes behind her glasses, she added, "I'm sorry, when I'm nervous my southern drawl gets worse."

"I make you nervous?" He cocked an eyebrow in inquiry.

"Well, yeah. I don't get up here much but with it being close to Christmas staff gets short-handed around here." Mary rattled on and giggled again shaking her head. "I'm sorry. I'm sure you are a busy man and don't want to hear all of this."

"No please, sit down and let's talk." Alec waved at one of the empty suede chairs in front of

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his desk. "So you're from the south. What part?"

"Alabama." She answered as she took a seat smoothing her skirt neatly over her knees and folding her hands demurely in her lap.

"My parents are from Florida." Alec supplied, not sure why he felt inclined to reveal any aspect of his personal life to her.

"Oh, I like Florida. It's a great place to vacation, but I don't do humidity and heat really well. It's one of the reasons why I moved from Alabama." Mary trailed off with a chuckle her pretty face blushing. "You didn't ask about all of this, did you?"

Alec smiled again leaning forward in his chair. "You've been working for Owens, for what, almost two years?"

Her eyes widened as if she was surprised, he'd noticed. "I've been Mr. Owens' assistant for a little over two years now."

"Strange, we don't seem to cross paths too often. I believe I see you mostly in the outer offices interacting with the employees on this floor."

"I hope that hasn't been a problem. I keep an index of birthdays, anniversaries, and such, and I tend to spend more time up here than I should because of it--"

"No, of course not," Alec chimed in with an easy grin. "I just wonder why you never personally gave me my gifts. I believe my assistants have delivered your gifts to me in the past, and it's never afforded me the opportunity to personally say "thank you". I don't know if you were ever told this, but I run an open door policy with all my employees. At the end of the day I'm just like the rest of you."

"Uh," she tilted her head to the side. "No, I wouldn't say that, Mr. Mercer, if it wasn't for you..." She paused leaning forward in her seat. "*We* depend on you for our livelihood. I'm thankful that I have a great job and that I can work for a company that allows me to celebrated holidays with my family. Giving your employees two weeks off during the busiest time of the year in your field is very generous."

"Ms. Christmas I need you to be honest with me. Do my employees find me...unapproachable?"

Alec tried not to chuckle and failed miserably when he saw Mary fidgeting in her seat as if she was trying to decide if she should say what she was thinking or tell him what she assumed he wanted to hear. Apparently frankness won.

"Er, well, most of the time you're breezing through the offices with an entourage of executives on your heels and a cell phone to your ear. I think it's not that you aren't approachable; it's just that everyone sees how busy you are. I for one would never impose on

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your already full schedule,” she explained. “It’s just feasible for me and the other employees to deal with your assistant.”

“Speaking of assistance,” he stated, seeing a perfect opening. “I find that I’m without one, or I would have sent someone down to retrieve these documents in the first place. I apologize for any added work I’m putting on you.”

“Don’t apologize, I--”

“No,” he broke in. “I asked *Owens* to make the delivery, and he should have done so himself. I know you should have left over an hour ago. We allowed all our hourly employees to go home early with pay to begin the holiday vacation, as a gift along with a nice bonus.” Alec released a long sigh. “My executives get paid well to be at my beck and call. You should have been allowed to leave on time with the others, while your boss, saw to it that *his boss* received what he asked for.” Alec spoke bluntly.

“Really, I don’t mind,” Mary blurted. “I shouldn’t be here taking up your time.”

“No, it’s I that is taking up your time, and if you will indulge me, I do so because I have a reason for keeping you here.” Alec leaned back in his chair clasping his fingers over his abdomen. “I have a dilemma, Ms. Christmas.” He smiled. “May I call you Mary?”

“Of course.” She smiled again.

Alec was caught off his guard as he was hit with a flip-flop feeling in the pit of his stomach. He could swear every time she smiled at him the more attractive she became to him. Alec shook his head in silent protest. He was looking for a new personal assistant that was smart and didn’t threaten his girlfriend in anyway, and ‘Mary was that person, wasn’t she?’ he asked himself.

Pushing all doubts away, he asked her, “Mary, how would you like a new position?”

“Huh?” Her double chin dropped and her round eyebrows arched high like McDonald’s golden arches. “A new position, Sir?”

“Please, call me Alec,” he insisted.

“I don’t think that would be proper,” she replied respectfully.

“Nonsense. I’m your boss you’re about to become my personal assistant I hope, and I don’t like those I work close with to call me Mr. Mercer. Mr. Mercer is my dad.” He shrugged his broad shoulders. “Well, Dr. Mercer is my dad, but you know what I mean. He’s retired now.”

Alec scratched his head feeling foolish. When had he become chatty? Hell, he usually didn’t have enough time to get six hours sleep, and here he sat one hour late for his dinner appointment with Erica sharing his personal frustrations, with this charming woman. How did that happen?

“How about it Mary? Are you interested in advancing? Would you like to become my

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personal assistant?"

"I'm honored Mr. Mercer, but I really don't like the thought of leaving Mr. Owens in a lurch. He was nice to give me a permanent job as his assistant. I tried for over a year to get my foot inside this door but regardless of my impressive resume, I never got a return call."

Alec flushed. He knew for the past few years he had given Allison's Executives Assistants all his business and never thought anymore about it, because the women that she sent over did the service expected of them. The problem came when they also expected to land themselves a high paying executive. Sometimes the plan worked, other times they found themselves out of a job because they brought their personal displeasure into the work place. Which brought him to his current situation.

"You mind if I ask how you came to work for Mr. Owens?"

"By association," Mary mused. "I worked in the floral shop with his wife, and we became very good friends. She knew I had a degree in Corporate Management, and had been an Executive Assistant in Alabama, before I moved here. She put in a good word for me."

"I'm sure she did," he laughed remembering what Owens last assistant looked like. His wife wasn't a fool. Alec rested his chin on his hands with his elbows perched on his desk finding he really did like listening to her talk. Her voice was soothing like waking up in the mountain cabin with fresh snow on the ground feeling cozy beneath just the right amount of blankets on the bed. He sighed inwardly.

"Yes, she sure did, and I owe her and Mr. Owens, big time." She finished.

"Well, Mary, I too know a good thing when I see it, and I've got to have you." Alec said and caught himself. Dropping his hands to his desk he clasped his hands together. He really needed to get more rest. What was he saying? "I mean, I want you as my assistant. I will handle Owens."

"I suppose as long as he won't object--"

Alec's brow pulled into an affronted frown. She trailed off into silence. Of course, Owens wouldn't object to his boss promoting her, he was the one in charge. He of course would make it a priority to get Ally to hire Owens a suitable replacement. More in keeping with the type of assistant like Mary a true professional, with qualifications being the major factor in hiring.

He loosened his silk tie, something else he usually didn't do outside his home, but it seemed to be getting rather warm in here tonight. "Mary, I assure you Owens will be agreeable. Now, I need you to start immediately because my family and I will be heading up to Greenwater Ranch in the Cascades for the holiday break. You'll need to be ready the day after tomorrow. I'll be by to pick you up, say 8 a.m.? Please make sure you dress comfortably because it's about a two hour

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drive.”

“Huh? Me, go with you?” Mary leaned forward in the chair.

She only said what Alec was thinking. Why did he just invite his new assistant to spend the holidays with him and his family? Well, he had done it before, of course, but those women were his current paramours. His initial intention with Mary was to leave her here working and communicate electronically.

Nevertheless, what if the lines froze, yeah, that happened sometimes up there. They could be without power for days and then where would he be with his assistant, new and not being able to ask him questions. Yes, this was for the best. Mary had to come with him.

“Yes, of course. Is there a problem?”

“Well, there could be. Will I be back home by Christmas Eve?”

“No. You will be spending Christmas with me and my family,” Alec answered. “Why are you shaking your head?”

“I’m sorry Mr. Mercer. I can’t accept your offer.” Mary said bluntly standing up and smoothed her hands over well rounded hips. Nice full hips, he thought, but that wasn’t here or there.

“Why not?”

“If I can’t visit my parents for Christmas, you’re going to have to find someone else.” Mary said pushing her glasses back up on her nose.

Alec released a deep sigh his lips pursed in thought. “Mary, I’ll be paying you handsomely for the holiday.” He coaxed.

“That’s not the point Mr. Mercer. I’m grateful for the offer, but in my thirty-two years, I’ve never missed spending Christmas with my Ma and Pa, and they’re getting up in the years. So I don’t intend to start now, she stated firmly. “So if you will kindly excuse me, I’ll leave you now. Alec felt a weird sense of panic, as he saw Mary turn making her way towards the door and he would wonder later about that, but he knew he could not let her walk out of his office and possibly out of his life. He stood up bracing the heels of his hand on his desk, and asked, “Mary, don’t go!”

She halted with a hand on the doorknob and faced him once more, waiting for him to continue.

Alec was as surprised as she was from what came out of his mouth next and hours from now he would never understand why he said it. “Ask your parents to come along too. The more the merrier. As you said, it’s Christmas, and it’ll be fun. There are plenty of available rooms, it

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used to be an old ski lodge that was remodeled into a vacation home and there will be plenty of food.”

“I don't know,” Mary moaned, worrying her bottom lip. “Are you sure it won't be a problem?” She looked hopeful and said, “it sounds like it will be a lot of fun, especially if there is snow.”

“As you begin to work with me Mary, you will find that I don't make offers that I don't mean.” Alec answered. If he hadn't been sure when he made the offer, he was now, looking at the current smile on her face. He forged ahead trying to make the deal even sound sweeter. “You know this will give us a chance to see if we work well together. If you aren't happy with me, then once we return you still will have your position with Owens and with him being away for the holidays, none the wiser.”

“I suppose you're right.” Mary agreed softly.

“As I stated, the place is huge and my parents will welcome the distraction of company. Since my brother died, Christmases doesn't seem to be the same,” Alec confessed.

Even though this was the first time he admitted it aloud, it was the truth. He was sure his parents would welcome the distraction and be delighted with the extra company. His parents were hospitable folks. However, it was Bostonian born Erica and her blue-blooded parents that made them feel less than comfortable being themselves.

Thinking of Erica, she wasn't going to appreciate him turning their engagement family gathering into a working holiday with a family neither of them knew. He wondered if Erica's parents would have a problem with black people? It was a conversation he never felt obligated to have with her? Hell, he didn't even know if his potential fiancée would have a problem with people of other cultures. All he did know was that in his home his guest would be respected, for their sakes he would hope they held fast to their manners.

As if sensing his train of thought Mary stared at him. “You know, if you wish to rescind the offer at any time before we leave, I won't be offended.” Mary stated, her entire face softening giving her a somewhat ethereal quiet appearance that had him staring at her in a more accessing way.

Ignoring her question he found himself asking, “Mary, do you always wear your glasses?”

She grinned in that way that was contagious, and he smiled back. “Only if I want to see.”

Alec threw back his head and laughed. “Of course.”

“Seriously, I wear contacts, when I'm in a more social setting.” She added with a saucy wink, and he assumed he was mistaken because of its subtleness. “I prefer my eye glasses for reading and working.”

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With a grin still on his lips he finally answered her previous question, "I won't change my mind about the invitation just make sure everyone is ready to travel early at the appointed time. I'll give you the information to relay to your parents if they accept the invitation. I will provide them transportation if they wish."

"Thank you," she nodded. "I've taken up enough of your time. Good night Mr. Mercer."

"Alec." He interrupted.

"I'll call you by your first name once I know for sure if I'm going to be your assistant." Mary spoke logically. "As I said, if you find yourself changing your mind before we leave, just let me know."

"I won't," he assured her.

Alec watched her as she scribbled off her phone number and address on a piece of note pad paper on his desk. "I'll see you the day after tomorrow, and if you *change your mind*," she repeated for the third time. "I wish you and your family a safe trip and Merry Christmas."

"Mary." Alec sighed, leaning back in his chair with his hands clasped across his abdomen.

"Yes Sir?"

"Pack warmly and you may want to bring a couple of semi-formals. We dress up for Christmas dinner and on New Year's Eve we throw a big party for the townspeople."

"Mr. Mercer..." Mary began.

He already knew what she was going to say. "I won't change my mind, Mary. Have a good night." He dismissed her.

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CHAPTER TWO

Mary slowly walked down the hall and practically floated into the elevator pressing the button that would take her from the thirty-third floor down to her workstation located on twelfth floor.

Alec Mercer was even more handsome than his magazine photos. She had seen him from afar on occasions, but this had been the first time she actually was close enough to really get a good look at him.

Tall, dark, and handsome he is, but that wasn't a surprise, she had seen how gorgeous he was even from a distance. The one thing she hadn't expected from a man in his position was his kindness or the ease in which he laughed and smiled.

He had a smile that made her stomach tingle and her breathing labor intensive. She liked him, and she was going to enjoy working with him she was sure of it. After picking up her personal items to leave the building, Mary stepped off the elevator into the private parking garage of Mercer Advertising Incorporated. Security was there as usual.

"Merry Christmas, Ms. Mary Christmas," he called out with a wave of familiarity.

Mary stopped as usual placed her briefcase on the ground beside her, and leaned over the security station desk to reach for a mint out of the candy jar she kept filled up for the guys. "Hello George. You got the night shift this week?"

"Nah, I volunteered to do the holiday stretch, since the building is practically empty for the next two weeks, I figured it would be an easy go of it. Not to mention Mr. Mercer gives us all a nice size bonus," he confided.

"Wow! I didn't know he did that, and I'm sure the money will come in handy with the new baby and all." Mary smiled, wondering what else she didn't know about Alec Mercer.

Before meeting him in person, she had only noticed he barely had time to speak with anyone. He would pass by barely glancing to the right or left as people stepped out of his way. His voice carried a tone of influential authority and allowed for no debates as he waltzed through issuing orders while holding a mobile phone to his ear.

"Definitely," he nodded. "Having another mouth to feed, not to mention my brother was

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laid off his job this close to Christmas. I would like to help him and his family also.”

“I’m surprised with you being the new guy in security you didn’t get bumped for the holiday shift.” Mary picked up her briefcase preparing to leave. She had some packing to do, not to mention calling her parents and telling them they were going to be going out of town for the holiday, if they wanted to go with her.

She hoped so, she didn’t want to face the Mercer family and friends without reinforcements. What if they didn’t like her for one reason or another? Did she want to spend her holiday with no one to talk to?

Did rich folks like the Mercer’s sing Christmas carols and drink eggnog? Oh God, she needed to go to find some extra gifts. Mary wondered how many people were going to be there? She supposed, she could bring along some extra non-tagged items that can be given to a male or female, and some extra hand towels with her stitching basket; she could always give monogrammed hand-towels in a clench.

Mary shook her head to clear her thoughts of Alec Mercer and his demand that she deviate from her usual holiday plans. No sooner had she decided to not think about Alec, his name was being brought up once again.

“Mr. Mercer found out about the new baby, and he asked me would I like to do it and I said yes, of course. Even the highest sonority is not going to argue with him, but he gave those who would have had first dibs a bonus to, or so I heard.” George smiled broadened. “He’s some kind of guy, huh. Who knew?”

“Yes, so it seems.” Mary smiled thoughtfully. “Have a safe Christmas and I will see you in a couple of weeks.”

“Take care, Mary and thanks again for the monogrammed gloves, now when I lose one, someone always bring it back to me.”

She turned briefly. “No problem, handsome. Take care of that family of yours and tell your wife, Trish, hello.”

“Will do,” he nodded picking up the ringing phone.

On the drive home Mary tried once more to put Alec from her mind as she took the expressway home. Despite of her good intentions Mary found herself reliving each moment of their conversation in his office, wondering why she agreed to join him during the holidays with his family and friends in a cabin hideaway.

She thought about the way his eyes twinkled as he smiled, feeling disturbed by her train of thought, she shivered again. “Don’t even start thinking about him, that way, Mary,” she told herself as she pulled her car into her townhouse driveway. “I have to keep this in proper

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perspective because there is just too many things wrong with me thinking about my boss this way.”

Mary let herself into the house and dropped her keys on the oblong table beside the door in the entrance. Without hesitation she unconsciously followed her usual routine of kicking off her pumps, she strongly hated wearing shoes more than anything. She was all for the custom of no shoes in the house and she required it of everyone that visited her. It immediately gave people a sense of comfort, as if they were in their own homes. How serious can a person get when they're standing vulnerable in their shoeless feet

Next went the briefcase on the upholstered bench against the structured wall next to the stairs, and her coat over the briefcase. She refused to look at the contents ever again until she went into her home office or the workplace the next day. Every other part of her home was her safe haven from the stress of the day and work did not enter this part of her home, *ever*, until today.

The front doorbell shrieked causing her to jump. She rarely got visitors and when she did they knew to call first. Mary groaned, turned around and padded in stocking feet back to her ringing front door. “Get off the bell why don't cha,” she muttered peeping through the door peephole. A gasped of surprise touched her lips, and she gulped deeply. “Oh damn,” she whispered.

The bell shrilled again throughout her house and she smoothed her suddenly damp palms over her skirt before opening the door. “Mr. Mercer.”

“Alec.” He entered and his powerful presence seemed to take all the air out of the room.

“*Mr. Mercer*, don't take another step!” Mary called out.

“I'm sorry, I know I should have called first, but I was on my way home, and I forgot that I needed to give you copies of the outdated portfolios that are *rush* important. I hope you don't mind; of course you don't. These needs to roll out by New Year's Day and--”

“I do mind.”

“Huh?”

“I said I do mind, you charging up in here without being invited,” Mary stated plainly.

“I see.”

From the look on his face, she could tell he didn't see is intrusion as being rude at all. Mary took a deep sigh and said, “Since you're here, you may come inside, but first, I need you to remove your shoes and give them to me.”

He looked down at his feet and back up at her.

“Pardon me?” he asked, his black eyebrows arching in question. “Did you ask me for my

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shoes?”

“If you're staying, hand over the shoes otherwise you can give me the documents and leave. I will look at the files, after I pour me a glass of wine and order Chinese food for dinner. Not a minute before. When I come to work in the morning I will have the documents with me.”

“You're serious?”

“Mr. Mercer, my home is my sanctuary and my sanctuary has been blessed and purified of all stress and negativity,” she explained, yet he appeared to still be clueless regardless of her explanation.

“Excuse me, is this the way you treated Mr. Owens when he was your boss?” Alec asked abruptly.

Mary placed her hands on her hips and stated, “Mr. Owens wouldn't dare intrude on my home time, no more than I his. Also, I'm the boss in this house, and I'm still waiting on the shoes.”

“So for your time I have to give you my fifteen hundred dollar, *A. Testoni*,” he quibbled.

She could swear his strait nose went up in the air a notch. She shook her head and closed the front door and turned her attention back to her unexpected guest.

Crossing her arms over her ample breast she dismissed his argument and added with equal bluntness, “I paid three hundred and seventy dollars per square feet of hard earned money for this two-bedroom two-bath townhouse just because a professional *Feng shui* consultant told me this was a harmonious living space. Right now, you're slowly eating up my harmony, Mr. Mercer. So, lose the shoes and the paperwork, or I'll see you in the morning.”

He suddenly didn't look like his cocky self-assured self as he reached down and removed his shoes. “You aren't keeping the shoes, you just don't want me wearing shoes in your house, right?”

“Now, what would I do with a pair of men's shoes?” Mary smiled looking at his socked feet. “Fifteen hundred dollar shoes and you have a hole in your socks?” She quirked a brow taking the proffered shoes from his hands and placing them beside her pumps, feeling a brief disturbance from seeing his size thirteen's next to her size eight and a half. There was something intimate about that picture.

“First, maybe you have a boyfriend that is my shoe size,” he grinned sheepishly. When she turned around again he was removing his overcoat. “Secondly, I had a big meeting earlier today for a multi-million dollar account and these are my lucky socks.”

“I don't have a boyfriend so your shoes are safe, Mr. Mercer.” Mary cocked her head to the side adding, “You know, I wouldn't have pictured you as the superstitious type that would need

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luck of any kind.”

He cocked his head to the side looking at her from her head to her stocking feet that wiggled from his accessing stare. “That’s makes us even because I never pictured you being the *Feng shui* type.”

“I have so few devices, so allow me the couple I do have.” She nervously laughed and hung up his coat and her own that she placed over her briefcase earlier in the entryway closet, and once more she was feeling a fluttering in the pit of her stomach seeing their coats side by side.

“May I take off my jacket and tie too? For some reason I now feel ridiculously over dressed standing here in my socks.” He pursed his lips in deep thought. “I have no idea why.”

“Please, you can lay them over on the chaise by the bay windows.” Mary smiled walking over to the lacquer flat box she kept on the dark Elmwood *Qing* Coffee Table and removed one of the many restaurant menus.

“You order in a lot, I see.” He commented from over her shoulder, she gasped and turned too quickly finding herself nose to chest with him holding her by the shoulders to keep her from toppling back against the table. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Mary licked her lips and saw his eyes follow the movement. He dropped his hands from her shoulders licking his own lips.

“Uh, if you don’t mind, it’s been a long day, and I would like to get comfortable.” She stepped aside. “How about you look at the menu, and order something. I’d like a number seventeen and number five, with hot and sour soup.”

He reached out and took the menu from her hand. Their fingers touched briefly and their eyes locked. Alec cleared his throat and walked around the sofa table to sit on the informal cozy overstuffed gray sofa. “I like the way you have that dividing screen over near the window. The soft lighting of the setting sun coming through the windows shadows the silhouetted prints embedded in the screen. It seems to bring life to the corner behind it.”

“Wow, no one has ever noticed that before, and I put a lot of thought into it.” Mary pointed out. “I wanted to direct the energy from the window over to that corner because it’s too dark and basically useless to place a plant over there. How did you know?”

A slow lazy grin widened his mouth. “I had a girlfriend that decorated on a few of my investment suites abroad.”

“I see.” Mary spoke softly, chewing on the corner of her mouth. “Huh, I’m going on upstairs to change, do you suppose you can handle placing the order? Just tell them my name, they can put it on my account.”

“You have an account with a *Chinese* takeout place.”

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"Well it's not like having an account at *Crush*; but, Mr. Wu has my charge card number in his files."

Alec's eyes narrowed on her face. "Have you've eaten at *Crush*?"

"Are you kidding, on what I'm paid?" Mary caught herself and blushed. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

"Of course you did. Nevertheless, you no longer have to worry about it. I assure you working for me, that your salary will be more than satisfactory, and you will have an open account at *Crush*, so, if there are any clients I need you to meet in a more social setting..."

"Will that be happening often?"

"Possibly. I'm a busy man and my appointments sometimes overlap. There will be times I'll need you to be in one of those places until I arrive. So not only will you have an open first class account at *Crush*, but several other places. I will get the index to you, of course."

"Are we discussing business," Mary asked. "Do you ever just relax and not think about anything in particular?"

"Is that a possibility?" He smiled softly. "I don't know how to relax anymore. Insane, I know, but I've been going non-stop in one form or the other, since I graduated from Dartmouth College." As if on cue, his cell-phone in his jacket pocket penetrating the soothing quietness of the room loudly. "Excuse me, while I get this."

Mary moistened her lips and allowed her eyes to feast upon unobtrusively. The tailored navy pants and baby blue silk button-down shirt revealed a body that made her mind race and her heart beat faster. In addition, his buttocks were tightly muscled and their appealing shape cried out for her hands to mold them.

He went to Dartmouth, an *Ivy Leaguer*, why was she not surprised. Alec's probably walked around with a silver spoon shoved up that perfect ass, since birth. She wondered what he'd do if she reached out and she playfully goosed his bottom.

In her family, a butt didn't stand a chance. Around every corner a good-humored pat waited. Along with teasing pinches of affection, between her parents, mixed with a raunchy grip with bellies touching and lips kissing. She envied their ability to love so openly. It was something she has spent her adult life searching for and had yet to find. Deep respect and love were something you assumed would be easy to find in a world full of so many men.

There were a few times, she genuinely believed she had found the elusive love of her life. It was amazing how easily words of love came from a man's lips when he believes he's going to get sex afterwards. Yet, when she told them she was waiting for marriage before she went all the way they would stop calling.

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Mary was in no way completely ignorant, there was plenty a body could do without penis penetration, but that was never enough to keep any of them loyal. She couldn't count how many times they charged her with using her virginity as a bartering tool to trap a man! *Now, how crazy was that?*

What happened to a woman wanting to wait, just because it was her right to do so? Didn't it used to be something that was valued and appreciated? At the very least, respected? Well, she would live alone before she compromised on her dreams of having the love and security her parents have.

"Okay, where were we?" Alec turned his attention back to her and his cell phone rang again. He cursed softly. "Hello, uh...hold on a moment." He looked at Mary. "Do you have somewhere I can take this call? It's private"

Mary rolled her eyes releasing a deep sigh. It was going to be a long night. "You can take the call right here."

"Were will you be?"

"I'm going to be upstairs getting out of these work clothes." She looked into his eyes and pointed to the menu. "Make better use of that phone of yours and call for some food. You won't like me when my sugar gets low from hunger," she teased, amazed at how easy it was to do so with him. "I would also appreciate you turning off that cell phone until after dinner."

"Mary, are you giving me orders?"

Mary hesitated from the seriousness of his tone before lifting her chin a notch and placing her hands on her hips. This was her home. "Why, yes I am. Do you have a problem with that?"

Alec's eyebrows arched in surprise and his wide mouth spread into a grin. "If I did, I sure don't now, Mary," he said her name as if he knew her intimately.

Mary steadied herself when she turned on trembling legs to saunter up the steps. When she turned and caught his green eyes gazing at her ass, she felt heat steal across her face.

Caught. He turned his attention back to his phone call.

She smiled as she continued up the stairs.

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CHAPTER THREE

Dinner long finished and the table cleared Mary and Alec sat huddled together going over a final campaign layout package for a large beverage franchise.

Alec broke the quiet moment with a sigh, and then stated, "Mary, you're a Godsend. If this had been sent out with that error it could have cost me at least 100,000 dollars in revenues."

Mary shook her head in disbelief. "I can't believe your last assistant made such a foolish mistake on their invoice. I'm just glad it wasn't sent to them, because they could have forced you to honor this amount instead."

"I don't know what to tell you. Admittedly, Ally's girls look like something out of Victoria's Secret magazines, but I assure you their academic qualifications were impeccable. Allison wouldn't have it any other way, she advertises the each woman at her agency as a beauty with brains."

"I'm sure they do have brains, but when you're pretty, you don't have to use it, because being beautiful and helpless seems to instantly bring men to your rescue," Mary said, honestly. She ran the tip of her ink pin over the columns of figures one last time. She swiveled her chair from side to side with nervous energy. "Yep, must be nice to be so beautiful, that you get to do things that only the average woman read about in romance novels."

She looked up from the report to see Alec had crossed his arms over his chest, and leaned back casually in the high-back leather chair staring at her. She became increasingly uneasy under his scrutiny. "I'm sorry, I have a tendency to jangle-on when I'm tired."

Alec said "Which one of those categories do you put yourself in Mary?"

"You tell me Mr. Mercer. Would Allison James Agency hire me to become an invaluable assistant to a man like yourself?"

As Alec contemplated her question his mind went through the several assistants he tumbled over the years. Geri, with the sultry eyes, Tina, with the knock'em' dead natural D's, Lana, with the legs that didn't stop, or Pamela, with an ass you could rest all of your hopes and dreams on, sort of like Mary's backside.

Geesh, where did that thought come from? None of Ally's girls would ever physically look

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like Ms. Mary Christmas. After the conversation he just had with Allison after Mary went up stairs it helped him to realize none of those women would ever be allowed to be curvaceous and thick like Mary, without losing their jobs.

Maybe it was time for him to find another employment agency; he always assumed that Allison hired all kinds of executive assistants. He assumed being a close friend, she sent a particular type to his offices because in the male dominant advertising field, a beautiful assistant could seal a deal with a subtle smile.

It wasn't until he was in need of a less than model perfect assistant that he realized the truth, and it seemed as if he needed to make more changes in the office. He was fortunate no one had filed a discrimination lawsuit against his advertising firm. Alec made a mental note to meet with the head of personnel and Allison. A new year was coming and he was making changes in his personal life by proposing to Erica, so why not clean up his corporate office, or at least add more versatility based on merits, and not appearances.

As if Mary sensed she had put him on the spot, she politely began to discuss the advertisement plan setting on the desk before them. Nevertheless, Alec decided he didn't want it to be easy with Mary; he wanted to keep things comfortable and honest between them. It was nice to have a woman he could talk to without threading lightly because he wanted to fuck her. He didn't have to worry about that with Mary, she wasn't his type.

"You know Mary, you're right, you don't fit the standard model mold that Allison basically requires at her firm, or the type of woman, I usually choose as my assistant." He paused not sure how to continue, but with honesty. "In advertising I deal with beautiful people or beautiful things all the time and in doing so, I've become jaded in the way I was seeing everything, including the people I surrounded myself with."

"And now?"

"Now, I suppose you've opened my eyes to some needed eventual changes at Mercer's Advertising. I need you to set up a conference after the trip, of course with my personnel department."

"I think that would be a wise move. As it is now, you could be looking at a future lawsuit. It only takes one visiting associate, or disgruntled employee to file a complaint. You may consider adding some more diversity to the office, and it wouldn't hurt to hire a few male Executive Assistants." She smiled to lessen the effect of her bluntness. "At least if a lawsuit were to come in before you make the changes you can place the blame on the fact that you contracted an agency to handle hiring for you and they had poor judgment."

Alec shook his dark head. "I wouldn't do that to Allison. I'm the one with the last word

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especially when it came to my personal assistants,” he replied truthfully.

“Which brings us to little ol’ me.” Mary paused for a moment before asking. “May I ask why you ask me to work for you instead of having Ms. James send over another assistant?”

“Actually, I was on the phone speaking to Allison. I wanted something different from my norm. I was growing tired of women that couldn’t separate business from...non-business. I wanted someone that could remain professional and ...well you know,” he shrugged sheepishly.

“Yeah, you mean someone you wouldn’t be sexually attracted to,” Mary, smiled sadly and released a long sigh. “Suddenly, in walked me, *Mary, Mary, Ordinary.*”

“I know how shallow I must appear,” his voice softened with sincerity. “I wish I could say that I hadn’t stepped over the line with a few of my personal assistants in the past--”

Mary snorted and rolled her eyes.

Alec cut her a profound glare. “*I also know*, my personal life is rarely a secret, so there is no need to lie to you now, just to paint myself in a better light. I’m sure my reputation in the office for mixing business with pleasure, is well known.”

“Yeah, I’m afraid, I already find you completely hopeless.” Mary’s mouth spread into a teasing grin as she nodded in agreement. “Still, be warned, Mr. Mercer, the first time you ask me to cover your butt, about some indiscretion and lie to your fiancée or wife, I’m out of there. I won’t lie.”

“For shame,” he gasped placing his hand over his heart in feigned insult. “Oh, you aren’t going to make these new changes easy for me, are you? As of this moment I don’t have either, but I hope to change that soon. I can also assure you Mary; once I make a commitment, I’m very loyal. I would never cheat on the woman I love.”

“I see.” She made a motion of zipping her lips and throwing away the key before saying, “As long as you’re not looking for an assistant that bats her lashes at you and tell you how wonderful you are, then, I suppose, we shall get along splendidly.”

“Oh, that’s a shame, because I can tell behind the glasses you have beautiful eyes,” he teased with a smile that stole her breath away. “So are you sure you won’t flutter, those long lashes at me, just a little, every now and then?”

Mary blushed and looked away from his intent stare. “It works in both ways; mind you, your lashes put some women to shame,” she said honestly and added, “Also, you don’t need to flatter me, I know my abilities and my shortcomings.”

He shook his head, “Mary, when a lovely woman receives a compliment, she accepts it with grace, even if she doesn’t believe it’s sincere. You never let a gentleman know, you don’t believe him.” Alec laughed. “Besides, I deem, I already told you I never say things I don’t mean.”

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Mary adored the sound of his laughter; it made her smile and feel warmth in all the right places. “So you keep telling me. I believe you’re saying you’ve *never* told a woman you loved her to get her into your bed.” She crossed her arms across her ample breast.

“*Never!*” Alec’s smile widened as she gave him a skeptical look that told him she clearly didn’t believe him. “Well, maybe once, when I was seventeen.”

She shook her head.

“I’m not scoring any points with you, am I? So, how about I tell you something I know you’ll believe I’m sincere about.” He leaned towards Mary, his face so close she could feel his warm breath against her cheek. “I have thoroughly enjoyed this evening. I don’t remember when I’ve had such a comfortable evening, working. The hours we’ve spent going over these sketches and contracts, seeing them through your enthusiastic eyes, made me feel like the young advertising agent that nailed his first multi-million dollar contract.”

“Really?” Mary’s dark eyes widen in surprise. “Why, thank you.”

“No, thank you, Mary.” He touched and squeezed the top of her hand. “Also, never again do I want to hear you call yourself “ordinary”. You’re extraordinary to me. A true breath of fresh air.”

“Okay, you’re pushing the envelope of believability now, so stop while you’re ahead,” she giggled.

“One more thing, and I will stop embarrassing you. How did you instantly understand what I was trying to ultimately achieve in my advertising proposals without me having to explain my motivation?”

“I don’t know,” Mary shrugged. “You are good at what you do. I’m actually surprised that you are still working on these assignments instead of passing them down to be handled by your associates.”

“I guess because when someone is spending a quarter of a million on advertising to Mercer Advertisings, they deserved my personal attention. After all, this firm was built on my skills, attention to detail, and a gift for knowing how to set new trends,” he spoke with conviction instead of conceitedness.

“Yeah, I get that by looking at this layout. That slogan is going to catch on, and you’re going to hear it everywhere. Especially the jingle, it’s already playing around and around in my head,” she chuckled. “Have you found an artist to record it yet?”

He shook his head. “No, do you have any ideas?”

“Well, the typical thing is to find someone ridiculously popular at the moment and make them a spokesperson.”

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"I could do that, I have some great connections." Alec scratched his chin, his lips pursed in thought.

"Yeah you could, or you can become your innovative old self and have a nationwide search for the new face, televise it, and let the people vote on who they want as the spokesperson. Open it to people of all backgrounds, sizes, and nationalities."

"I strongly believe you may be on to something!" Alec couldn't help but turn in his chair and hug Mary, sitting in the chair next to him at her small cornered office desk.

With a catch of breath, he released her stunned by the warm tingling sensation spreading from where her soft cushioned breast pressed flatly against him. The sudden erection between his thighs caught him off his guard, and he placed some much-needed distance between them.

"Glad, I could help," Mary said softly.

He wondered had she felt what he felt? Probably not, he was just so used to having assistants that were all over him, singing his praises and expecting him to give them a lifestyle that few could only dream of. Mary wasn't like the other women; he didn't sense she had a hidden agenda for accepting the position he offered.

"Mary, thank you for allowing me to interlope on your personal time." He cleared the lump out of his throat. "I'll look over this last one, and then I promise I'll get out of your hair and allow you to rest."

"No problem, I'll finish making these notes, and it will be perfect by the time you meet with the client. Considering it's going to be running at the Super Bowl, there's no reason to go with my suggestions if they aren't feasible."

"I'm sure we can swing it no matter what," Alec absently reached out to touch her hand next to him in reassurance, but she moved it to rest in her lap, as if to say she didn't want him touching her. For some reason it pained him to think that Mary may have agreed to work with him, but may not like him as a person.

In all fairness she didn't know him...not yet, and he didn't know much about her and surprisingly enough, for the first time in a long time, he wanted to get to know more about a woman, than her favorite wine and sexual position.

Alec lashes fluttered, realizing he was staring at Mary, he returned his concentration to the contracts before him. It last for about ten minutes. Almost against his will, he found his eyes drawn once more to her dark head bent so meticulously over the commercial sample sketches before her. She had released her hair from a tight bun and pulled it back into a hair *scrunchy*, he believed they were called, something none of the ladies he dated would be caught dead wearing in their hair. Neither would they change into those black leggings with an oversized white

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peasant top in his presence.

His eyes followed the blouse as it dropped off one creamy brown shoulder. Without taking her eyes off the project she pulled it back up. Alec tilted his head to one side, but no matter the angle, the picture was just as nice. Mary wasn't a supermodel or beauty queen gorgeous, in the way Erica, and the many other women he'd known over the years, was. Still, there was something about her...

The one thing he realized about the other women is the more time he spent with them the more unattractive they became. It seemed as if there was never any balance in the relationship.

Sometimes he wanted nice companionable evenings like this one, with deep conversations and laughing. A great face and body got his attention, but it wasn't enough to keep him interested. Regardless of how much Alec could appreciate a woman's outer beauty, his ego couldn't handle the nagging question of *"Is she with me, for me, or my money and notoriety?"* and eventually he would learn it was all about what he was and not who he was.

After being in her company and seeing her move about, he remembered seeing Mary making her way through the office, he had barely given her a second glance, but he could remember her kindness to her fellow employers. She seemed to remember names and birthdays.

If memory served him right, it was Mary who had given one of his ex-assistants a surprise engagement party on the job. He may never say anything but all that this woman had done around the office for everyone, hadn't gone unnoticed. She was well liked by all and had practically become the office entertainment director on her own accord. Always smiling, always giving, that is Mary, and she is a good person to have around.

Of course, his asking Mary unexpectedly to join him at the family holiday home had been spontaneous, but the more time he spent with her, the more he was happy, he made the decision. He looked forward to knowing more about her and seeing if she was the hard and diligent worker, she appeared to be, he suspected by the time they spent working this evening, she was. The thing he hadn't expected was, the more time he spent in her company, the more adorable she was becoming.

Mary looked up at him and smiled; pushing those foolishly large glasses that seem to continuously slip to the tip of her pudgy nose, back in place. She really did have the most incredible eyes he'd ever seen; it was a shame to hide them behind those glasses.

Alec realized she was talking to him. "I'm sorry, did you say something?"

"I asked, if you had found something I missed?"

"Oh, no, it looks wonderful!" Alec sputtered, trying to focus his attention on the corrected documents in front of him.

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Mary raised her wrist to look at her watch. "You know it's almost midnight, so maybe we better go ahead and wrap this up. I need to get to the office early in the morning to get what we will need to draw up a new prospectus with a corrected pricelist."

He smiled and leaned back in his chair turning his full stare on her, "Does Cinderella turn into a pumpkin at midnight?"

"No, I'm already a pumpkin, so I actually turn into Cinderella when the lights are off." She laughed with lifted eyebrows.

"That's a good one," Alec teased. "I turn into a Prince, when the lights are off, because I'm considered a "toad" when their own."

"I very much doubt that. You're too handsome to be a toad," she said with ease.

"You find me handsome?" Alec couldn't keep down the warmth that spread through him.

Mary giggled, "I know, it's impossible to believe, right? Please, give a girl a break, I've already worked a ten hour day before you came here and took over, so at this point even Kermit the Frog would look sexy."

"So, does that mean you find me sexy too?" His surprised grin grew even wider, if that was possible.

"Oh God, I must be exhausted if I'm hearing the man voted to be one of the Sexiest Men on earth, fishing for compliments." Mary sat back in her seat with a playful chuckle.

Alec sighed heavily, she was right. He was practically begging for it. "You're right, sorry to put you one the spot, I think I'm exhausted also."

"I don't feel as if you were putting me on the spot," she quipped.

He began closing and stacking the files that littered the desk. "That's beside the point. You saved me, fed me, been a gracious hostess and delightful company. I hope you realize how much your graciousness has meant to me tonight."

Mary regretted saying it the minute it came out of her mouth; not the fact that she found him handsome and sexy, but for turning it into a joke when it was the truth.

Sincere contriteness displayed in his eyes. It wasn't as if she had never noticed his remarkable bedroom eyes; a luminescent green, surrounding by absurdly long black lashes, so thick, it looked as if kohl lined his bottom lids.

She looked down at his tan, strong, vein-lined hand as it closed around hers in a gentle squeeze. "Truly, thank you. Take your time coming in tomorrow and sleep in tomorrow. I'll have Marge at the receptionist desk; she will be working up until we turn the phones over to the service. It will be waiting on your new desk outside my office, when you get there."

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He really was a touchy feely person. She wondered if he realized that about himself. It didn't bother her because she came from a family of people that touched and hugged all the time. Still, his touch did unsettling things to her nervous system and made her feel foolishly reflective on things that weren't even a possibility.

"You don't have to do that, Mr. Mercer."

"Mary, if you call me by my father's name one more time, you're fired." He released her hand and reached for another file. "I'm just Alec or my friends and family call me Al. I don't feel right calling you by your first name, and you not do so in kind. The only times I expect formalities is in front of visiting clients."

Mary eyes grew round. She only heard the "fired" part. "You would really fire me if I slip up? I mean, I was raised to show my employers respect, and I may say it again, without meaning to. I..." Mary's voice faded as wrinkles of mirth surrounded his eyes. "Oh, okay, you got me."

"Are you always so serious?" he teased.

"No, but as I said, you make me nervous," Mary admitted.

"Well, I have to see what I can do about that. There is no way a woman with the name "Mary Christmas", can maintain one serious or nervous bone in her body."

"Well, I'm not so bad with..." she paused as she followed his tongue. Just watching him casually moistened his lips was hot. "With people I know."

Alec cocked his head to the side, his face spreading into an easy smile. "I suppose you best get to know me fast. After all, we're going to be spending the holidays together in a secluded mountain hide away."

Mary licked her lips, "Not...not alone."

He shrugged, absently, placing the files in his briefcase. "Except for the caretakers on the ranch, and your parents; for the first week it will just be us." He paused and a light frown creased his brow. "Mary, it never occurred to me, but I suppose it should have; you don't know me from Adam. "Are you uncomfortable about being alone with me in general?"

"Of course not, Alec," she reached out and took his hand. "I've been alone with you all evening haven't I?"

"Yes."

"Look, I didn't mean to make it sound as if I was nervous because you were some ogre or something," she explained. "It's just you're nothing like what I expected and this entire evening has taken me by surprise."

"May I ask what you'd expected?"

She had no idea.

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“Let me guess, you assumed I was some tight-ass, Ivy League, rich white boy womanizer with a silver spoon in my mouth, with no concern for the people less fortunate than myself?”

Mary felt her cheeks go warm, because earlier something similar had crossed her mind. Now, she felt different.

“Well, uh...truthfully, I really had no idea of what to expect, I’ve just seen you around the office and heard rumors...read some things. I suppose, from all that I’ve heard. I was shocked that you would hire me to be your assistant in the first place. I definitely didn’t expect to end up a guest in your home for a few weeks.”

“I don’t know why not? You’re a hard worker, and I needed someone.”

“True, but because I’ve been at your company for two years I know that I’m not the usual type of assistants you like working closely with you. I’m by no means a supermodel or wannabe actress, by any means.”

Realizing she was still touching him, she pulled back her hand and held it fisted in her lap. Her heart pattered foolishly in her chest and moistness gathered between her thick thighs. She was embarrassed. She was actually reacting to him as a man. She wouldn’t do this; he was her boss, an employer, and practically engaged.

Mary had to put her association with him back into perspective, just because he ate dinner and spent the evening in her home, it didn’t mean it was a date or even the beginning of a deep friendship. He had a problem, and he paid her to help him solve it. That was all there was to it.

Her eyes connected with his and swallowed the newly formed lump in her throat.

“Do I really seem that shallow to you?” He sighed. “I’m sorry, Mary, I didn’t mean to get on the defensive. It’s just I’ve worked hard to become the man I am today. My family wasn’t suffering, but I come from a middle-class family. Dad is a retired physician and my mom, a retired teacher.” He slowly smiled. “The only silver spoon that was in my house as a kid is in a case nestled next to the good china, Mom, only brings out for guest and holidays.”

Mary laughed. “My mom does that too.”

“Really? See we have something in common, probably more, once we get to know each other better.” He assured her. “What do your parents do?”

“My father, Joseph, is a retired veterinarian and my mother, Miriam, was a nurse, but she had a difficult time conceiving and when I finally came to them late in life, she became a stay at home mom.”

“So, you’re an only child.”

“Unfortunately. How about you?” She inquired. “You mentioned you had a brother deceased. I admit I heard about him dying in Iraq when it happened. I sent a card and flowers to

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the funeral home, along with donating to the Disable American Veterans fund in Ben Mercer's name."

"That was a surreal time for me and my family, so I hardly remember anything about it but the pain and disbelief over the entire situation. I do know I personally ordered "thank you" cards and asked my assistant at the time to send them out."

"Maybe mine got lost in the mail, but I and I'm sure everyone else understood. We all have dealt with grief and know how crazy it can get during that time." Mary placed a hand on his and squeezed it before releasing it. "I can't imagine how many condolences you must have received being a public figure."

"Still, it's embarrassing to think, those who took the time to send something, didn't get thanked for the thought. My mother would be mortified. She hand wrote all the ones she received a thank you letter," his voice faltered. "Thank you, Mary. I'm sorry it's a long time coming."

"Your assistant at that time was, Leslie Foster. She was out of there a couple of days after you lost your brother, she probably didn't get the chance, to follow up," Mary supplied.

Alec's eyebrows touched in a deep frown. "Leslie Foster? Ooh yes," he nodded his head and released a derisive snort. "I remember her. She left because she was upset by the fact I didn't want her to accompany me to my brother's funeral. She accused me of not wanting her to meet my immediate family."

Mary scowled. "That's no excuse to leave you high and dry when you needed her the most. You were grieving, it wasn't an appropriate time to be meeting your parents."

Alec gave her a half smile. "Thank you for placing me in a justified light, but she had been right. My family is personal, and I don't just introduce any woman to them. I try to keep my parents out of all this public hype as much as possible."

"What about during your holidays with your family, do you usually go alone?" Mary asked, realized she was being personal, but curiosity about him won out over good manners.

"The ones that have accompanied me to the holiday home were only with me during the week before the rest of the family arrived."

Mary lifted an eyebrow in shock. "I'm surprised to hear that, since I'm supposed to bringing my family and spend time with you and your family."

"It's different, we're not sleeping together." He pointed out, with a lingering stare at her mouth before looking away. "I suppose, I always felt that if my mother, saw me with a woman during the time they were at the ranch, she would surmise it was a serious relationship, and it would give her hope. My marrying and having children is at the top of my mother's Christmas

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wish list.”

He looked at her again and grinned, once more his eyes seemed to be searching her face. Yet, he didn't say anything.

Mary could feel her heart racing from the way he had stared at her. She wondered what he had been thinking in those few moments.

“Was Ben, your only sibling?”

He swallowed deeply and nodded.

Mary found herself touching him again as her hand reached out to cover his. She didn't do it intentionally, but she wouldn't have done any less for another employee that needed comfort in the office.

“I understand that your pain of your loss is still fresh. I can never know what it feels like to lose a brother, but I lost...I lost, a cousin within the first year they went over there. I wish I could say it gets easier within time, however, it doesn't.”

“No, it doesn't,” he agreed. “So, is it only you and your parents?”

“Oh God, no,” Mary chuckled. “My parents have sixteen brothers and sisters between them, and it makes for a huge family, with more cousins, than I can remember. Yet, the cousin I lost, Jamie, well, I miss her so much. She was my running partner. We'd go to karaoke and sing and dance the night away.”

“Man, don't I know it.” His eyes darted around the room in frustration. “That's the worse thing about losing a loved one isn't it, Mary? Suddenly, all the things you're use to doing with them seems so significant to your entire life, when at the time, it was just another thing that you had to find time to do.”

He sniffled, shifting uncomfortably in the chair he continued, “Ben, and I use to shoot pool and work out together. Now, when I do those things with other people I just feel so damned guilty for being alive while he's not.” He stood abruptly causing the chair he occupied to roll back on its wheels.

Staring up into his eyes, she realized they had forgotten he was her boss, she was his employer, and for the moment, they were just two people sharing the pain of losing a loved one. Alec was a man, in a lot of pain over the loss of his brother, and she wondered if he even realized that he had yet to truly grieve over his loss. He probably has been playing the position of supportive son for his parents' sake, and hadn't had the opportunity to deal with the fact that he too had lost something very precious.

Mary's heart went out to him, and she couldn't stop herself. She stood and faced him, wrapping her arms around his broad shoulders. “It's okay to feel sad, and in this case angry,

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because it all seems so senseless these days and times. After many years past of wars, there should never be nothing but peace, but as long as men find something to fight about, our families will die.”

“How do I heal from the guilt, Mary?” Alec muttered. “I’m the eldest, and it’s never crossed my mind to go and fight for this country. “Instead, I’ve written several checks to good causes and considered my civil duties done.” His hold tightened on her as he returned her comforting hug. “My brother was the better man, and he died because of it.”

Mary shook her head against his shoulder. “You can’t think like that, Alec, we all have our calling in this world and yes, your brother died for his country which is very noble, but now he can’t do anything else. You are alive and in a position to continue helping and there is so much need right here at home. We our fighting a battle in our own streets against drugs, and the abuse, hunger, and lack of medical care of our citizens.”

She leaned back to look up at him. “You, have to choose your battles. A check and an ink pen can change the ordinary lives of hundreds, be it here or written to one of the many causes worldwide. You’re doing what you can. You became a man of means, and you’re sharing that wealth with other causes. It is noble. Many just keep getting richer and act as if the world owes it to them. They don’t feel the need to share because their heart tells them to. They do so because it’s a tax break.”

He laughed, his voice husky with emotions. “Hey, don’t knock a good tax break.”

She smiled, sharing his humor. Playfully she jabbed him with a finger in his side. “*You*, know what I’m saying.”

He nodded. His hands resting gently on her round shoulders, “Yeah, I know.” He blew out a long breath. “I also know you’re good for an ailing spirit, Ms. Mary Christmas.”

Suddenly Mary was very aware of how close they stood together, his chest almost touched her breasts. His hands were on the curve of her shoulders and hers rested on his lean waist. Bewilderment held her still, and the debts of his searching eyes stole her breath.

She felt something happening to her, warming up her insides, a thawing of her defenses. She had no control over these unfamiliar sensations, and it terrified her. This just wasn’t any man making her feel this way. It was Alec Mercer, touted as one of the magazines top “100 Beautiful People of the World”, and another called him “The Bachelor of the Decade”.

Here stood the “Hunk of the Month”, standing in her small townhouse apartment just a breath away from her lips and all she could think of was...nothing logical. Her mind was a void of all thoughts, except for one. *I want him to kiss me.*

Needing a distraction Mary broke the sexually charged silence, “I’m glad I can help you feel

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somewhat better,” she whispered. “Would you like to take some leftover Chinese food home with you?”

He picked up a strand of dark brown hair that must have come loose from the scrunchy at the nape of her neck when she changed clothing. “I suppose I did get carried away on ordering, didn’t I?”

She managed to nod.

“I hate it when I get a taste for something and I’m not sure what it is, I end up buying almost everything on the menu trying to figure out exactly what I’m hungry for. Don’t worry I put it on my card, paying for dinner is the least I can do, for coming to your home, to work.”

“Did you finally figure it out?” She asked.

“Figure out what?”

“What you were hungry for?”

“No. I still feel...hungry.”

“Yeah,” she fully understood. She was hungry too, but it wasn’t for food. Wow, that had to be a first. She finally desired something more than a meal. She desired Alec.

So much so, she was actually aching, she realized. She wanted to ask him to stay, to let her first complete sexual act to be with someone like him, handsome and experienced. She desired to savor his mouth on hers and discover the texture of his tongue.

Her face tilted up to his. He leaned into hers, his lips so close she could feel the air from his nose dusting across her face. Her body stiffened. *Oh, God he’s going to kiss me*, she thought.

Mary was thinking about all the possibilities if she would just give in to this moment. Yet, instinctively she knew it wasn’t possible. The moment she removed her clothing, and he saw her scarred body, his desire would crumble at her feet, just like Cinderella’s ball gown before she had to change back into her rags.

She stumbled back against the chair pushing it aside. “How about I leave you to finish up in here, and I will go to the kitchen. You have to take home some of those leftovers. The *Lo Mein* noodles are excellent cold.”

“Mary.” Alec called her name softly and reached for her; she skirted around him rushing out the door, down the hall towards the kitchen.

Mary reached the kitchen on trembling limbs, not quite sure how she managed without embarrassing herself. Out of breath, she leaned against the refrigerator, her forehead pressed against the cool stainless steel as she waited for her heartbeat to slow down. Whatever Alec was going to say or do, she didn’t want to risk finding out. He was about to kiss her, and she wanted him to. She wondered if she ever wanted anything more, then she wanted Alec Mercer at that

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moment. Was she crazy? Stuff like this didn't happen to her.

It was smart to walk away, and once she faced him again with his food, she would pretend like the moment where they almost kissed never happened. There were no reasons to ruin an otherwise, great evening.

She didn't want to hear the speech she knew would come of him telling her all the reasons why anything beyond being co-workers was out of the question. She also didn't want to hear him tell her that she needed to go back and work with Mr. Owens after all. How could she have been so stupid, touching him with such familiarity? She hugged the man for chrissake!

If Alec Mercer had planned to say any of those things, Mary wasn't going to find out tonight. When she came out of the kitchen with a loaded bag of food in her hands, he was gone.

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CHAPTER FOUR

It was nine o'clock sharp Alec slowly walked into his office the following morning stifling a yawn. Considering the argument he had with Erica on the phone for renegeing on their scheduled dinner date, it wasn't surprising that he didn't get any sleep. Yet he couldn't blame his lack of rest on thoughts for Erica seeing how she wasn't the woman that had him staring up at his bedroom ceiling in thought until four in the morning.

Mary, sweet Mary did you fall asleep with ease or were you thinking about me while I was thinking about you? Was she disappointed when she found that he had left without saying his goodbyes? In his wildest imaginings he would never have thought he could spend such an enjoyable evening in the company of a woman he wasn't sleeping with.

He couldn't believe how well they meshed. The times they were discussing work, Mary would finish his sentences as if she could read his mind. It was disconcerting, but also strangely relaxing, knowing someone could be so like-of-mind enough that conversation flowed and crescendo with such ease. When the Chinese deliveryman arrived with their called in order, he listened to her laugh and speak with him in Mandarin as if she was born to the language.

He was impressed and curious as hell to know what other little surprises she held behind that broad smile and calm exterior. As the evening progressed he learned she could be playful and yet serious when it came to working with numbers and grafts.

Alec shook his head; his brows drew together in puzzlement. How was it he was sitting here whiling away thinking about this cute chubby black woman he hadn't even noticed except fleetingly by her kindness about his office?

Maybe, this *thing*, linking them was not a "thing" at all. Just maybe, it was the fact that for the first time, he was dealing one-on-one with a woman that he didn't find in the least bit sexually attractive. This could be what it felt like to have a friendship with a woman.

It was like what he had with Ally; only, he had slept with her when they were testing to see if they should be more than friends. Soon afterwards, even though the sex was good, for him at least, it only confirmed to Allison what she already knew. She was gay. Today they still laughed at their attempt at being lovers, yet it only strengthened their friendship, and like most good

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buddies, they were usually attracted to the same type of women.

He wondered what Ally would say if he told her he thought he was smitten by this chubby *munchkin* of a woman. It defies all his past history dating choices. Was he going crazy or what?

Alec once again wondered about that moment that passed between them? The moment he wanted to kiss Mary, more than taking his next breath. Corny, he knew, but it was the truth and he spent all night going over it in his head.

As if conjuring her up with his persistent thoughts of her, Mary appeared at his office door with a cup in her hand. His eyes roamed over her, taking in the flush that tinged her lovely face.

“Good morning, Sir, I have your coffee; black, with one container of cream and two packets of sugar.” She gave him a warm smile.

Alec breathe a sigh of relief, he though she would come in this morning full of questions and expectations about what passed between them the night before or at the very least ask him why he skipped out on her without his leftover food.

“How did you know?” His brow cocked upwards in surprise.

“Last night. While we were working, I noticed,” Mary mumbled.

“You look like you need that coffee more than I do. Did you get any sleep?” Alec asked noticing the suspicious puffy dark rings beneath her eyes.

Mary came further into his office. She placed the cup with several napkins on his desk before him. “I prefer hot chocolate and whipped cream. I only need about six hours sleep and I’m good to go.”

Alec couldn’t believe he was the one bringing up last night, but someone needed to. Mary was waltzing around this morning as if nothing had happened. What in the world was he thinking? Maybe it was best if he did the same.

Even though he decided to keep his mouth shut he found himself saying, “I apologize for leaving without saying thank you and goodnight.”

“No problem.” Mary shrugged and smiled at him “I brought the leftovers to the guys in security, so it won’t be wasted.”

“Mary--” He caught her fixed look with his own.

“I’ve checked your calendar, there wasn’t much on it until after the New Year since you had already planned on this month long get away.” Mary looked down at the notebook she was holding in her other hand.

“So you aren’t upset about last night.” His brow puckered in a frown. Where was the drama, the questions? Had he misread her reaction to being close to him? Had the feel of his body pressed against hers not affected her at all when she hugged and comforted him?

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“Why should I be, I understand you’re a busy man. Besides, we were finish with work and it was a very productive night. We accomplished much in a very short time, don’t you think?” She pushed her glasses up off the tip of her nose. “Which reminds me, I need the files that are in your briefcase so that I can make copies before the courier gets here.”

There was something different about her today. Maybe it was the black pinstriped skirt and matching jacket. Her curves appeared more luscious instead of overweight. He also liked the way she wore her hair today with the wisps of hair encircling and softening the lines of her face. She still wore a bun at the nape of her neck but it wasn’t as tight, it was more of a loose knot today and very becoming on her round full face.

“Do you want me to come back for the files later and send it out with the evening courier? If so, I can go and finish sending out the Christmas cards. I thought it would be best to handwrite a personal note inside for each client, then I will run them through your printer for your signature.”

“Mary, about last night--”

She continued to rattle on as if he hadn’t said a word, but Alec refused to *pretend* like nothing had happened, as she seemed to be doing.

“Mary what time did you get in this morning?” He interrupted her loudly.

“Six o’clock,” she answered. “I guess I need to get to those cards.”

“I left well after midnight, so you didn’t get six hours sleep,” Alec pointed out. For some reason the thoughts of her being as restless as he had been, made him feel better. “Mary, Didn’t I tell you to sleep in today?”

Mary shrugged. “You did.”

“So why didn’t you?”

Mary looked up from her tablet. “It wasn’t necessary.”

“Mary, last night I enjoyed being with you...very much.”

Yeah, he said it. He was the dumb ass that once again brought the conversation back to the night before. What was wrong with him? Why couldn’t he just follow her lead and let it go. He always wished women wouldn’t talk about things that happened the night before to death, and he’d finally found a woman that didn’t want to talk about it at all, and he couldn’t keep his mouth shut.

“Huh?”

He saw her mouth drop wide, her damnable glasses slipping to the tip of her nose.

“I...I was going to show you how much before you ran out of your office.” There he said it, the purple elephant in the room had farted and now they would move past it and never speak of it

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again.

Mary touched the side of her face, a gesture that showed anxiousness and if that didn't give her away, her etching towards the door did.

Alec got up from his seat rushing towards her he placed a firm hand on her shoulder, stopping her. "Mary, don't even think about running again. We need to discuss this. I don't want this to become a problem in our working relationship."

"It's not a problem for me, as you see, *I'm working*." Mary groaned. "What you doing?"

"At the moment speaking with you," He raised a brow, dropped his hand from her shoulder, and slid them into his black trouser pockets. He hoped it would keep him from touching her.

For some unknown reason he always ended up touching her shoulder, her hands, tucking stray tendrils behind her ear, everything he shouldn't be doing as her employer. Mary wasn't like the others; she wasn't here with an ulterior motive. All he needed was one of the few black women in his office filing a sexual harassment suit against him. Okay, it was time to clear the air and make sure all was well between them.

"Alec, are you trying to tell me you want me to go back to working for Mr. Owens?"

"Of course not," he answered quickly. Maybe too quickly because she looked startled by his answer. "Look, I'm just trying to say, there's no reason for you to feel uncomfortable with me, or fear that I was coming on to you. I was talking about my brother and feeling vulnerable, that's all."

"I wasn't uncomfortable," Mary's voice rose an octave. "That is, not until now. This is making me uncomfortable. There is no need to discuss something that didn't happen and I can tell the difference between attraction and vulnerability."

"Really?"

"Of course," she released a nervous giggle. "You were vulnerable, that's all it was. Of course you wouldn't be attracted to someone like me. I just happened to be the one there when you decided to open up about your brother."

"You believe I don't find you attractive?" Alec asked. "Mary, do you honestly think what happened between *us* was just my feeling vulnerable? You didn't feel anything at all, you were just giving me a shoulder to cry on, is what you're saying."

Why was he offended, isn't that the excuse he'd just given her. Why did it sound insulting to him coming from her mouth? Did she truly think he didn't find her attractive? Well, she wasn't his normal type, but the erection he had thinking about Mary last night, wasn't some fluke of nature.

"*Us!* What *us?*" Mary shrieked. With a calmer voice she said, "Mr. Mercer, I think you are

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making a big deal over nothing. Of course, I think that is all it was. I've seen the type of women you've dated in those magazines. *None* of them look like me."

"You want me to fire you don't you?"

"What?" Mary crossed her arms over her ample breasts and cocked an eyebrow. "Hell, no, I don't want to be fired, but at this point I will be more than happy to return to my position with Mr. Owens, which would mean, I would be on my month long Christmas holiday about now, and not having this foolish discussion with you!"

"Excuse me!" Alec laughed and spread his palms wide. "I was just teasing. Remember, I told you I'd fire you if you called me "Mr. Mercer" again?"

"Geeze," Mary rolled her eyes. With a deep sigh she dropped her hands by her side the ink pin pattering against her thigh as her agitation grew. "Look, how about we start fresh. I know you aren't attracted to me romantically, and I'm not attracted to you. Now enough said about the subject."

"You're right." Alec nodded in agreement. This was a good time to let it drop. Every one was happy and life could go back to...wait a minute, did she say she wasn't attracted to him? Why not? What was wrong with him? "Why don't you find me attractive, Mary? Is it because I'm white?"

"Oh Lord, help me Jesus, here we go," Mary threw up her hands. "Alec, did you get any sleep last night, because you aren't making any sense to me, this morning."

Alec smiled foolishly. He liked the way she said it in that southern throaty smoky voice that made him have such wicked thoughts of rolling naked beneath sweeping willow trees. He could picture himself lifting ice cubes from a glass of iced tea, trailing it down the length of those thick brown thighs.

He cleared his throat and eyed her from head to toe. "No, I didn't get any sleep last night." Alec's inspection roamed back to her face and the soft look he found there caught him by surprise.

"I'm sorry, Alec, I suppose our speaking of your brother made it hard for you to sleep."

"Actually, that is not what kept me awake," he replied.

"It isn't. Was it something to do with the contracts? You know I went over them again and everything is fine now," she halted as he began to shake his head. "Not the contract? Then what?"

"Not what, but who, Mary." He gave her an accessing look. "It was you. Every time I closed my eyes I could see your face."

"Me," she said, sounding surprised. "Yeah right."

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"Don't look at me that way. I'm not making this up, Mary. I'm as surprised by this as much as you are." Alec confessed.

"This can't be real," Mary murmured.

"That's what I said," he shrugged with amazement. "After you left my office last night, every time I thought about your name, Mary Christmas, I couldn't help but grin like an idiot. Nor could I miss the irony of meeting you just when I needed help desperately, and this close to Christmas...I felt as if it was a sign."

"What kind of sign?" she encouraged.

"Every Christmas, my mother lights a candle for me. For the past fifteen years, she's made the same wish and it had me thinking, just maybe..." He looked at his feet. "I don't know what to think." Alec sighed, feeling awkward. Never had he been so open and honest with a woman about his feelings or his personal life, not even with the woman he was planning to ask to be his wife. What is it about Mary?

"You're saying that you think that I'm a Christmas wish your mother made sent to you?"

"I'm saying, as crazy as it sounds; just when I needed someone, you miraculous walked into my office, and when I couldn't find the discrepancy between the contract and proposal, you came to mind. Once again, *you* saved me."

"I'm flattered, but I think you need to go over there and lie down on that nice comfy sofa take a nap, you're talking nonsense." Mary's skepticism was written all over her face.

"Mary, you're magical," Alec said seriously.

"Alec, I dropped off some papers and you needed help. There isn't anything special about me; I'm being a good assistant. Speaking of work, I need to get back to it."

She moved towards the door and Alec blocked it. Alec looked at her biting down on her full bottom lip nervously. He didn't care what she said; there was something very magical about her.

"Don't leave yet. Please. Yesterday when you left my office and I wanted...no needed, to see you again," he said honestly. "So tell me why would I feel that way? I don't know you that well, but yet, when you're around I feel as if I've known you all my life. Also being with you makes me remember things I haven't thought about for years."

Curiosity must have gotten the best of her because she asked, "Such as?"

Alec's mouth spread into a wide grin. "My first train set as a boy, snow ball fights with my brother out at the ranch, my Me-Maw's silver Christmas tree with the color wheel--"

"Oh my God, my Granny had one of those," Mary giggled. "I sat and watched that stupid thing for hours. Green, red, blue and yellow."

Alec like the way her big brown eyes crinkled at the corners behind her glasses when she

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laughed. He chuckled. "When I was a boy, Christmas was my favorite time of the year. I remember standing on a chair to help cut out gingerbread cookies because I was too short to reach the counters. Oh, and the smell of mom's turkey roasting on low all night."

"Yeah, for me it was putting icing on the chocolate cake and the smell of ham baking through the night." Mary sighed rubbing her round belly. "I'd wake up starving in the morning after dreaming of food all night, because of the smells and Granny would slice us pieces of ham we could stuff in homemade biscuits for breakfast."

"Such sweet memories." He nodded in agreement. "I was the first to wake up Christmas morning and I checked to make sure the cookies I left out for Santa were gone, before I did anything else."

"You know I heard Santa once," Mary spoke softly as if it was a secret she'd never shared with anyone.

Alec snorted and received a punch in his shoulder.

"Don't look at me that way," Mary protested. "I did! I woke up before sunrise Christmas morning and I heard Santa say "*Ho-ho-ho-Merry Christmas!*"

He couldn't help but laugh at her pretend Santa voice. She was adorable.

"Never mind," Mary pouted. "I never suspected you were big on Christmas."

"Why? I love Christmas. I work like a dog all year, but I manage to take two weeks before Christmas and up till the day after New Years to spend with family and friends."

"Oh really, and that's why you're taking me and your work to the family getaway, because you're managing to take the holiday? I don't think so. I wouldn't be needed if you hadn't planned on working."

"I didn't get rich by being lax. Besides, I like what I do and if I didn't do it this way, I couldn't shut down shop for my employees to have time off during this time of year."

"I can tell you like being in the advertising field. I have admired your work for some time now." Mary looked him in the eyes.

A big smile came to his face. "Thank you, that means a lot coming from you."

"I enjoyed your company too, last night." Mary released a deep sigh. "But don't worry, as I said, I realized that you needed help and I'm good at what I do, so why not think to come to me and ask for help." She surprised him by winking at him. "See nothing magical about making a logical last minute decision."

"Humph." His eyes drifted to her mouth. "Ms. Mary Christmas, I would have thought you would have more faith in this *Christmas Magic* theory than I would."

"Why because of my name? Sometimes a girl has to be logical about such things otherwise,

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she's bound to start wishing for all kinds of impossible things becoming possible."

"Nothing is impossible," Alec said moving closer. "Also, nothing you have said explains why my thoughts kept me thinking about you all night."

"What exactly about me were you thinking? Maybe I can help you figure it out," Mary offered.

Alec nodded and grinned at her. "Oh, yeah, I believe only *you* can help me, Mary"

"Well, that's what you pay me for. So what's the problem?"

"Well, if you don't mind I would like to have this one off the clock because I don't want you to feel as if you're obligated to follow through." Alec confidently spoke the words.

"One what?" She tilted her head to the side in question.

"One kiss. May I kiss you?"

"Wh...what?" Her mouth dropped wide in surprise, he couldn't much blame her because he was surprised he had the nerve to actually ask. Alec only knew he couldn't spend another sleepless night wondering if her lips were as soft as they looked.

"You don't have to kiss me if you don't want, Mary," Alec rushed out, not wanting her to get the wrong idea about his request. "It's not like your job depends on this. It's just you have such wonderful full lips and when we're this close all I can do is wonder what it would feel like to kiss them."

"Alec, I believe you can't imagine working with a woman you're not intimate with." Mary reasoned softly. "I imagine at this point you're wanting to give yourself a reason to return to what you're use to and I'm not it. I'm not the type of woman that plays *footsy* with the boss. We haven't signed any contracts yet, so you can call the temporary service and have them to send out your usual, bimbo with a brain," she finished sarcastically.

"I see. So, you're telling me I don't really want to kiss you, even though I find you totally kissable?" he asked as his contemplation dropped from her eyes to her mouth.

"Alec--"

"Mary, are you about to tell me, that I rather kiss one of those women instead of you?"

"Yeah, exactly." Mary agreed dryly. Then she laughed and shook her head.

"What's so funny?"

"You had me going," she giggled. "Are you testing me? Are you trying to see if I would swoon under those bedroom eyes of yours and wilt with desire from that deep sexy voice like your previous assistants."

Alec cocked his head to the side and crossed his arms across his chest gazing at her as she slapped the tablet in her hand against her leg in laughter. He couldn't believe she was so clueless

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and at her age.

"You," she continued to laugh aloud. "Me? That's so hilarious. Bring out the hidden cameras. What are you going to do show this after the family dinner, so you all could get a big laugh?" Her laughter died down and suddenly her eyes were bright with unshed tears.

"Oh, damn," he muttered not seeing the humor, considering he was being serious and sincere. Without another word, Alec swept Mary into his arms and kissed her until they both were breathless, until his closed eyes crossed, until he was sure of one thing; he liked kissing Mary and while he was doing so he didn't have visions of supermodels dancing in his head, just her, and she was driving him crazy.

Mary felt genuine relief after Alec excused himself after kissing her. She didn't think she could come up with something proper to say even if her life depended upon it.

On wobbly knees she felt her way into the chair not far behind her located in front of Alec's desk. She placed her elbows on top of the desk's mahogany surface and held her head in her hands. The pen and tablet she had been holding was discarded on the floor, once he pulled her into his arms.

What just happened? Why in the world would he want to kiss her in the first place? Well, it wasn't as if she weren't kissable; she just didn't think a man that dated the type of women he escorted around town would give her a second glance, and kissing her, that way was too bazaar for words.

The one thing Mary simply couldn't deny was that she found Alec attractive and sexy. *Really sexy*, she thought. There was something so naturally masculine, openly aggressive and self-assured about him that made her feel vulnerable and needy. The feelings scared the hell out of her. What was she expected to do with them? She never felt this way before.

Mary touched her lips. She could still feel him. Still taste the coffee tainted sweetness he left in her mouth as his tongue swept against hers. She'd never been with a man and as the years went by with no possibilities it was getting easier to tell herself she didn't want one. Her life was just fine and she definitely didn't need this multi-millionaire playboy thinking he can add her to his long list of forgotten lovers, just because he knew he could.

With a deep moan, Mary's head thudded onto the desk. "Dear *GOD*, what am I going to do? I know that I lit a candle and prayed for you to bless my life with love, that is, if you desire that to be the path in my life."

"*Lord*, this man, well, you can't get much more "opposite" than Alec and me and I know, opposites do attract, but how often does it last? I mean, get real, how could it?" Mary sighed and

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added. "You know what's best for me. Give me a sign...please."

"Hello?"

Mary cried out, startled by the unexpected feminine voice behind her. The office building was supposed to be empty for the holidays, except for her, Alec and the two guys in security. Mary glanced over her shoulder and found a tall immaculately dressed, slender black woman hovering in the doorway.

Quickly she stood up brushing the wrinkles from her skirt. "Hello, I'm sorry I didn't realize anyone else was in the building today." Mary pushed her glasses up off the tip of her nose and craned her neck to look up at the tall beautiful woman. She had to be almost as tall as Alec. Mary knew Alec had no appointments, so who was she? Was she here to see Alec? After the kiss had he called the infamous Allison James Beauty and Brains, temporary service to send over her replacement?

"Are you alright? You seemed a bit flushed," the beauty said. "Maybe you should sit back down."

"I...I'm fine." Mary fidgeted. "My name is Mary Christmas, can I help you with something?"

"You got to be kidding." The woman's mouth spread in wide grin. Her teeth were long and blinding white against the backdrop of her flawless ebony skin. "With a last name like Christmas your parents named you, *Mary*?"

Mary smiled and nodded as she always did when someone had a reaction in regards to her name, and there's always a reaction. "Yup, my parents' have a great sense of humor, but they were right about one thing...it's an immediate ice breaker."

"Yeah, I guess a sista has to learn to roll with the punches growing up with a name like that. I mean, you can't even think of your name or say it without smiling. Maybe there's something to your parents' reasoning after all." The woman winked.

Mary chuckled and crossed her arms across her breasts as she arched back just to be able to look into her accessing eyes. "Uh, was Mr. Mercer, expecting you?"

"No, probably not, but I have a standing open invitation. No appointment is necessary." The woman paused; cocked her head to the side, and said, "You can tell me to mind my own business, but do you always hold such heavy conversations with yourself?"

Mary blushed staring down at her feet her glasses slid down her nose. "You heard all that, huh." She looked back up with a deep sigh.

"Enough to know it sounds like you may be having some man woes." The woman moved forward with her hand extended. "By the way, I'm Allison James, a friend of Alec's."

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“Oh, now it’s my turn to be surprised.” Mary laughed taking the woman’s hand and shaking it in greeting. “So you’re the Allison James that keeps sending the hussies with brains.”

Allison laughed out, releasing Mary’s hand. She went to sit behind Alec’s desk and put her mile-long legs up on his desk, crossing one booted heel ankle over the other. “You mean my reputation has got it like that around here?” She threw back her head with and let out a loud squeal. “Guilty, girl, I’m so...so guilty as charged.”

Mary couldn’t help but like her, she was chic, sexy, beautiful and not afraid to sport a boy-short natural hairdo. However, with her supermodel appearance, she pulled off her entire look elegantly. She couldn’t help but stare in envy at her.

She said she was a “friend” of Alec’s. Mary wondered, just how friendly were they?

Seeing Allison James for herself, she now understood why the woman had a penchant for hiring model statuesque women in her company. Mary didn’t like it, but she also couldn’t hate a sista for being a smart businesswoman, everyone knows beauty and sex sales.

“Ms. James, I’ve read your portfolio in *Business Weekly*, so regardless of the fact that I believe you should add a little bit more versatility to your stable, I can forgive you for it.” Mary smiled and cocked a sarcastic brow.

“Ha! No, you didn’t.” Allison threw back her head and laughed again. “I like you. I love him, but damn, if he don’t know how to take a break and live a little. What kind of boss lets their people off for a month during the holiday-sweeps and takes up the slack with just himself and some poor assistant. That’s why he can’t keep them.”

Mary rolled her eyes. “Really? I thought he couldn’t keep them because he couldn’t keep his zipper up.”

Both women laughed.

“That too. However, dogs run together and I have no room to bark up his tree.” Allison said with a flip of her wrist, bracelets shuffled and clicked together.

Mary confessed. “I’m the “poor assistant” that will be spending the holidays working and I don’t mind hard work. Also I doubt I have to worry about the boss’s zipper,” she laughed nervously.

Allison’s eyes narrowed on her as she eyed her from head to toe in the same infuriating way that Alec had a way of doing from time to time. Just like with Alec, Mary suddenly felt as if she was standing there naked and flushed.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that Ms. Mary Christmas, there is something about you that I can’t quite put my finger on,” Allison murmured tapping a red manicured nail against her high cheekbones.

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Mary was speechless. Was she saying that Alec would be interested in her? That was impossible. Yeah, he kissed her, but he was just curious and it hadn't been the first time a man had told her she had nice lips. It was just the first time one had done something about it. It took Mary a moment to realize Allison had moved the conversation back to something of a less personal nature, in which she was thankful.

"I should be pissed that Al has hired you, because he has a contract with me for at least another six months."

"Well it's a good thing for you that he did and that he's a friend because the last *assistant* you sent him made a huge monetary mistake that could have cost the company big time and if that had happened, Ms. James, I recommended he allowed the expense to roll back onto you. I read the contract, you are liable for the reputation and abilities of the women hired, regardless of their outer appearances," Mary pointed out.

Allison released a moan and pinched the bridge of her nose. "I know and that's why I'm here, to discuss what happened and to apologize."

"Why? Because the error wasn't a mistake at all?" Mary questioned, already knowing the answer.

"You are good." Allison clucked her tongue. "I need you working for me."

"I tried, but I couldn't get past the receptionist in your offices either. By the way, you might need to tell them to go through the pretense that they're accepting applications from everyone." Mary jabbed; she couldn't help it.

Job discrimination in any manner pissed her off. Worse, beauty being a requirement was ridiculous, seeing how it was something in the "eye of the beholder". How were the restaurants, clubs, and bikini carwashes hiring only women of a certain look, or with certain bra cup sizes able to continue such practices? Why was this acceptable in these days and times?

"You know what Mary? I must be finally growing up, like Al, because I'm too, am tired of all the drama with these ladies and their ulterior motives." Allison shook her head. "Too many women are looking to be taken care of these days and by any means necessary. I tell you I'm not willing to risk everything I've built due to someone else's behavior."

"I assumed it was a behavior you condoned," Mary stated.

"Regardless of what is written about me and my company, I don't run an undercover whorehouse. They do all that banging on their own dime because I created this job to give a beautiful intelligent woman the ability to be seen for more than her looks."

"That has to be a first." Mary chuckled. "Are you trying to say that beautiful women are being discriminating upon too?"

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"When I got tired of being a model, Mary. I tried to find a job to use the expensive education I have from Harvard. None of the men cared about my degrees and such. They made it obvious in what they were interested in," Allison explained.

"I decided to use this newfound knowledge to my advantage and opened this agency. Unfortunately, not all the women that I hire look at the opportunity I am giving them to excel in this man's world, by using their brains. They choose to use their looks and bodies, hoping to reel in men like Alec on a permanent basis. They are too shallow to realize, in Alec's case that he is looking to marry and build a family with someone like his loving and sweet, *Mom*.

"So why is he always seen with the model types?" Mary asked, her curiosity getting the best of her.

"Because, it's good free publicity and what many expect of him. It also doesn't hurt that Alec, like a lot of people, enjoys a healthy sexual lifestyle and they are willing." Allison clicked her booted heels together before dropping her feet from the desk to the ground. "I learned a lesson after Alec's call requesting something of me that I didn't have. He may be my friend, but he is also my biggest client. I should have been able to fulfill his needed requirements for an assistant."

"True. You also should have seen to his welfare when it comes to his last assistant. Someone, at your agency is slipping on the background checks. It took me an hour to find out that Miss. Hillary Thornhill has a restraining order against her in California for stalking her previous employer. At another location, she received an undisclosed settlement to keep quiet and drop her sexual harassment law suit."

A serious expression came to Allison's face. "I have checked into that and all parties have been dealt with appropriately. I don't hire people from the same family because of reasons such as this. This woman had a cousin in my office that falsified her records to get her a position in my company. I'm seeking legal actions against the both of them.

"Well, that is good to hear." Mary nodded.

"Even though Alec has tried to assure me he wasn't upset with me about what has happened, it's because of my mistake, he's been spending these last couple of weeks working harder than usual. He's had to go through all his files and contracts over the past six months, making sure everything was accurate and because he is doing it on the down-low to protect my reputation, he's been doing it alone."

Mary felt a pain in her heart at the stress Alec must have been going through these past weeks, especially because he had taken it upon himself. It impressed her that he would go to such lengths for a friend.

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"I'm trying to stick to my original standards, because I wanted to prove that all women that happened to be blessed at birth or through plastic surgery," Ally laughed. "They all weren't gold-diggers in disguise." She sighed, her full lips pressing thin. "I swear, most of my ladies are professional and abide by my policies, Mary."

Mary reached out and touched her hand. "I believe you and stuff like this happens, even to the best of us. Sometimes, it doesn't even have to be about the money. It's hard to work around someone as attractive as Mr. Mercer, who is also openly friendly, and not see it as an invitation to fall in love with him."

"Is that how you feel being around Alec?" Allison's head cocked to the side in question.

Mary could feel her ears burning. "No...God, no, I barely even know him." She spoke loudly, or it seemed loud to her own ears.

Allison's eyes narrowed on her face and Mary realized her lie must have been written all over her face. She may not be in love with him, but she found him very sexy and attractive.

"I'm going to share something with you." The other woman leaned towards her, her hands clasped in front of her resting on the desk. "Ever since Alec's been rolling in the serious dollars, he's been burned in the relationship department more than the average guy."

"I don't know why you're telling me this. I'm just another Mercer employee." Mary giggled nervously, biting on her lower lip. "If I'm nothing else, I'm a hard worker and loyal to those deserving of it. If I find that I can no longer work with Alec for one reason or the other, I'll leave with the same ease that I came into this position unlike the hussy from hell you sent over here."

Allison threw her head back in laughter. "That is good to know and if for some reason that day comes," Allison removed a business card from an elegant silver case and slid it towards her across the desk. "You will always have a job with me. I'm looking for good hard working beautiful women." She smiled and added, "In all shapes and sizes."

"I will keep that in mind, but for now I know several hard working women I can send your way." Mary offered.

"Are they as pretty, diligent, outspoken, and loyal to their bosses as you are?" Allison questioned.

Before she could answer, Alec strolled into the office. "That's impossible Ally, for there is only one Mary, and she's mine." He paused next to his desk, shoving his hands in his trousers. "I see you ladies have already made fast friends, especially if my *best-bud*, Ms. Allison Grinch, is trying to steal my, Mary Christmas, away from me."

Mary glanced over at Alec and caught his eye. For a moment, Allison's bold presence

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seemed to fade away and she and Alec were alone. He didn't have to touch her or even smile at her, but the look he gave her told her he too was remembering their kiss.

Once again she could feel him holding her tightly in his arms. His body molded against hers as if he was meant to be there. His kiss tasted of fresh roasted coffee and an essence that was all Alec. Mary felt breathless from the memory and it made her aware that she was going to have to be on her toes or risk losing her heart to this man.

"Uh...it was nice meeting you, but I have work to do," Mary muttered tearing her eyes from Alec to look at Allison.

"The pleasure is all mine, Mary." Allison stood and grabbed her hand and squeezed lightly. "Call me and we'll do lunch. I'm sure Al won't mind and by the way, be careful about speaking aloud to yourself, I could have been the person you were speaking about."

Mary didn't miss Allison's pointed look at Alec. She was mortified. Allison had heard her talking to God about Alec. Her face reddened and she released Allison's hand and scurried to the door. "Buzz me if either of you need anything."

She hurriedly pulled the office door closed behind her. For a moment, she leaned against the door and stilled her overheated emotions. How was she going to spend an entire month on a snow-capped mountain knowing Alec was sleeping probably just a few steps away from where she was?

"What the hell was that about?"

"What?" Alec asked tugging Ally away from his chair and taking a seat.

"That long look that passed between you two." Allison pointed out while dropping down in the seat that Mary had occupied. "I might as well have dissolved into the woodwork."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Alec shrugged, leafing through the notes and files Mary had left on his desk. It seemed like she had more energy after a night of non-sleep than he did. Now that he kissed her, he doubt, he would get any sleep tonight either. They had a long drive ahead of them tomorrow, so maybe he should pay Erica a visit and try to convince her to have makeup sex, since he won't see her again until the following week, when she arrive with her parents in tow.

"Alec, we know each other too well, don't play with me. I saw the way you and Mary looked at each other and then she hurried out of here. I hope you don't plan to mess with her head. I don't think she knows how to play the games we play. There's something very sweet and innocent about her." Allison said defensively causing Alec to look at her.

"What's it to you? You're interested in her for yourself or something?" Alec heard the

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harshness in his voice. What was wrong with him? Why was he feeling possessive about Mary? It wasn't as if he truly wanted her for himself, or did he?

Allison threw up her hands. "What? Yes, I like her. I don't know why and no, not the way, you're implying."

A wide relaxed grin spread across his face and he nodded in agreement. "Yeah, there is something about her. I like her to and no, I don't intend to play games with her. After Hillary, I'm out of the game for good. I'm really ready to get married and settle down. This last year has been hell on me with so much bullshit." Alec released a heavy sigh and leaned back in his chair.

"Al, I can't apologize to you enough. I had no idea that woman was crazy."

"Is crazy because I don't think there is any help for her," Alec's dark eyebrows puckered in frustration. "No more casual sex for me, I'm getting too old for this and I've come to far, to loose it all over a some foolish woman's fantasy that I was in love with her."

"You still getting the hang-ups?"

"No, changed all my numbers, she wouldn't dare call here knowing all calls are being recorded. Amazing, first she comes to me with some story that I got her pregnant."

"That old stupid trick as if a man in your position wouldn't want a paternity test." Allison piped in.

"I'm sure some are stupid enough to take care of her while patiently waiting for the child to be born, and I may have done the same thing. Nevertheless, when I saw the date on the sonogram was 3 years old, that was the last straw for me." Alec rubbed a hand over his burning eyes as fatigue settled about his shoulders.

"I reasoned she made this accounting nightmare of your invoices in hopes that you would call her back to help and she would swoop in save the day."

"All I know is if these had gotten printed and mailed out, I would have been obligated to honor the set advertising rate if they forced the issue." Alec ran a hand through his hair in disgust.

"Geeze, man. I am truly sorry. Is there anything I can do to help? I don't mind being an extra pair of eyes," Allison offered. "I feel like shit for not being on top of things. I didn't know after all these years, I would still need to hold everyone's hand."

Alec's face softened. "Ally, I don't blame you. It's hard to stay on top of things when the person you thought had earned your trust did the wrong thing for the right reasons."

"Yeah, back in the day when I started this business there was loyalty, but these women these days are looking for an easy dollar and I must change with the times." She admitted. "I'm going to restructure my business."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Ally, because friendship or not, if you can't fill my required

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needs based on what they may be at the time, I will have to find someone who can.”

Allison nodded, “I can understand.”

“Good.” He grinned he rolled his tense shoulders beneath his jacket. “I want first dibs on any of those executive assistants recommended by Mary.”

“So you heard that?”

“I heard a lot,” Alec confessed.

“I know you didn’t hear her prayers, because I was standing at the door, alone,” she pointed out.

“No, I heard that too.” He cleared his throat and shuffled through the files, not wishing to see the accusing glare Ally was probably giving him at the moment for ease dropping. “You can stop giving me the evil eye, Ally. It wasn’t intentional. I must have accidentally left the intercom on after my last call with the art department. When I went down there, I could hear your conversation through the phone.”

“Now that you know the girl is obviously falling for you, what are you going to do about it?”

Alec shifted in his chair. He didn’t want to have this conversation. He wasn’t sure how he felt about Mary supposedly private confessions, or his developing feelings for her.

“Ally, I don’t want to talk about Mary with you.” She lifted a questioning brow and he closed his eyes a moment before reopening them to see she was going to drop this. He knew the look. She was digging in her heels.

“Look, there is nothing to talk about. She’s cute and from what I can tell so far, very good at her job and we work well together. There’s nothing else to say.”

“Alec, you can’t even say her name without smiling and your eyes are damn near sparkling. I don’t think I’ve seen that look since--” she trailed off.

“You can say it Ally.” He chuckled. “Since my first crush, Beth Leslie, in middle school.”

“Al, I know the fella’s made fun of you about the types of girls you were attracted to and even I had a laugh at your expense a time or two, but we were kids.” Allison reached out and took his hands in hers. “Hell, we aren’t kids anymore and all those guys are married with beer guts and a van full of kids. While you have all these women revolving in and out of your life and bed because you’re still trying to live up to expectation of others.”

“Geeze, Ally, that’s not what I’m doing. I have enjoyed the times I’ve spent with most of the women I’ve been with,” he defended his choices. “Also, I’ve already found the woman I’m going to marry, remember? That’s enough for me, so it should be enough for all of you!”

Ally took his hands in hers and tugged. “I can’t believe you’re sitting here lying to yourself. What’s up with that?”

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“What do you want from me Ally? I’m proposing to Erica, isn’t that enough?” Alec cursed and pulled his hands from hers. “I swear you and my mother are going to drive me fucking insane.”

“Al, Erica Fontaine is a socialite, with no talents of her own. Her career has been made by being seen on the arms of all the right men and she doesn’t have a sincere bone in her scrawny body,” Allison argued.

Alec groaned and gave her a hard stare. “It’s not even 10:30 yet and I’ve already had a long morning. So why don’t you cut me a break and let it go.”

“Just one more thing.”

“Go ahead, because you’re going to say it regardless,” he said as he ran his fingers through his hair in frustration.

“Damn straight. We’ve been friends since pre-school; I don’t care if I piss you off. I know you’ll forgive me.” Allison said bluntly. “Al, as *I* get closer to forty, I find I don’t care for the way things are in my life. I have everything I could need, accept for a loving relationship. I want to find a nice girl and settle down.”

“So do I,” he agreed. “That’s why I’m making my intentions for Erica clear to you and my family during the Christmas holiday.” His scowl deepened. His face softened before adding, “Ally, if I don’t have you, my best friend in my corner, how can I expect my mother to come around? I need you to appreciate and respect my decision.”

“First, your mother and I want you to be happy and as I said, we don’t think Erica is *long term happiness* for you. The minute you decide to retire to the ranch for more than just holidays, she will be out of there. Erica can’t exist outside the city. Secondly, you don’t have anything to prove by making her the “one.” She waved a long manicured finger at him.

“Alec, you have more money than you can spend in a lifetime and your reputation brings clients to you. You’re about to embark into your comfort years. Therefore, whom you choose to date or marry at this point, should be all about what’s in *your* heart. You don’t have to live up to those stereotypical expectations you picked up in high school.”

“What do you mean by that?” Alec glanced at Allison and held her stare. “I actually cared for the girls I dated in high school.”

“Hey, you’re really out of it today; because, it’s me you’re talking’ to. I’ve known your life’s plan since you spoke your first word.” Allison rolled her eyes and threw her feet up on the desk and then reclining comfortably in the chair. “You knew what you wanted to be, and how many kids you were going to have, and even the type of girl you were going to marry before we got out our diapers.”

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"You're always exaggerate," Alec chuckled. He thought about pushing her feet off his desk, but he knew it would be a waste of time, she'd put them back up there just to aggravate him. Allison was like having a sister and brother rolled up into one.

"Hell, in the past few years I've hooked you up with half of the women you became involved with. You know, the shallow beauty queens, models, actresses, and socialites. All the types of women you thought the world needed you to be seen with. After all what self-respecting playboy will be seen with a woman over a size four? But, I know the type of women you really like."

Alec gave her a look that warned her to stop while she was ahead. Those days were over. In high school, he had learned that certain guys with certain reputations to uphold were supposed to have a certain kind of girl on their arm. It was an inclination to your social standing and the girl on your arm was seen as a visual aid to how popular you were amongst your fellow classmates.

As a quarterback and senior class president, he had dated the head cheerleader. When he went to college, the girl that had worn his letterman jacket was homecoming queen. That's just the way it's always been. As a businessman the woman with the biggest breasts, and the longest legs got you slaps on the back and an opening for lucrative business deals. Why change things now?

"Ally--"

"I'm just saying, Alec, you don't have to go with the flow anymore. If you're attracted to Mary, don't push it aside; explore it." Allison put up her hand up to stop his protest.

"If you're about to lie again, don't. You've always liked the girls on the heavy side, that's why you usually asked me to hook you up with assistants with the curviest butts and biggest fake boobs. It's the nearest thing you can get to your attraction to voluptuous. But none of them have the plump all-over curves of a big girl."

Alec dropped his chin to his chest and broodingly leaned back in his chair. He couldn't argue against the truth so he didn't even try. However, he could *try* to keep his hands off Mary, because it was best...for the both of them.

Indeed, she was sweet, kind, and too trusting and he was toxic when it came to matters of love. He didn't even know if he could truly be a good husband and father, like his dad was. It was something he'd never done before. What if he was lousy at it like he had been in his relationships?

He didn't want to fall in love with Mary only to have her hating him in the end for placing business matters before her and what if he became bored like with the others? Look at how he left Erica hanging just last night. If he didn't recognize anything else with Mary, he realized she

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deserved someone as wholesome and giving as she seemed to be.

Alec's mind drifted to remembering the feel of Mary's lips on his and resisted the urge to touch his lips in front of Ally. He could tell by kissing her that she wasn't very skilled and the thoughts of being the one to teach her the art of kissing, touching, and anything else she may not have experience in, hardened his cock. *Damn, let it go Alec.*

"Al, why settle for Erica, of all people?"

"Ally, I chose Erica for marriage because she doesn't need me to love her. I just need to occasionally be by her side in public functions, and we can have an open marriage and the both of us can be discreet. You know, one hand scratches the other's needs." He shrugged. "Erica gets me. She's a female version of me, which makes us perfect for each other."

"I can't believe she agreed to children." Ally shook her head.

"Child. We agreed to have, one child." Alec looked away from Allison's stunned gaze.

"What the hell? Alec, for as long as I've known you, you've wanted a big family. Your own "rowing team" is what I believed you said."

Alec chuckled. "That was the foolish ranting of a kid that had no clue what women went through having babies. Now, I know."

"Damn. Boy, what else are you willing to give up for this farce of a relationship with Erica? She's the one who wanted you to hire a less attractive assistant, now that doesn't sound like a woman prepared for an open marriage to me. Sounds like she's telling you one thing and planning another--" Allison paused and laughed. "Oh, this is going to be interesting."

Alec eyed her suspiciously. "What do you mean...interesting?"

"Well, I think once Erica gets a look at Ms. Mary Christmas she is going to think she has gotten her way, once more." Allison eyes crinkled in mirth.

"Ally what's your point, I'm am giving Erica her way and I agreed to her reasoning. I'm learning to change and adapt to someone else's needs," he reasoned.

"Bullshit! Erica doesn't know what we know."

His eyebrows lifted and he cocked his head to the side in question. "Which is?"

"Mary is exactly your...type of woman." She shook her head before he could protest and added, "No, not the type to end up as a one night conquest in your bed, but the type of woman that will capture your heart, when you least expect it."

"Speaking of bullshit," Alec groaned and stretched his arms over his head stifling a yawn. There was no reasoning with Allison once she made up her mind about something. Besides why should he argue the point? Once he married Erica, it would put all these foolish talks with Allison and his mother to rest.

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The thing that Allison said that left him concerned was that Mary was exactly the type of girl he'd crushed on in high school. She was right, but he never listened to his heart back then, so why allow his personal feelings to interfere now.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Mary sat gazing out the window, her mind a jumble of thoughts about nothing in particular. She just needed a distraction from the man that sat close to her in the confines of the SUV as it made twists and turns up the mountain road.

Every now and then, while he concentrated on the road she stole glances at his handsome profile. His thick dark hair wasn't combed into any particular style today and it fit well with the casualness of his black turtleneck sweater and blue jeans. She never seen him dressed this way before and it was nice. It made him seem more approachable, unlike the playboy workaholic the tabloids made him out to be.

Mary closed her eyes and took in the masculine smell of Alec's spicy, and woodsy aftershave. She knew the smell *Drakkar Noir*, because it was her favorite, though she didn't anticipate having a man in her life she had purchased a small bottle of the cologne to spray a little on her body pillow and cuddled against it every night. There were times she would cry and had wished the pillow were a man that loved her and held her back.

Already she felt it was going to be the best Christmas of her life. Now all she needed was to tie a decorative bow around Alec's slender naked hips and have him waiting under the tree on Christmas morning. Then again, getting Alec as a Christmas gift was whimsical on her part. It would never happen. Just because he kissed her once, out of curiosity so she thought, it didn't mean he actually felt something for her.

"You're quiet." Alec was the first to break the silence. "I hope you're not too disappointed about your parents not being able to join us today. Didn't you say if your father is better by next week, they would drive up?"

Mary nodded in response. "It worries me when my parents gets a cold, because of their age. A simple cold can easily turn into pneumonia. I believe the older they get, the more I worry about them."

"That's understandable," he smiled reaching over to squeeze her hand resting on the armrest between them.

She glanced down at his pale hand over hers and wondered if he had any idea of how much

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he seemed to touch her throughout their time together. She wasn't used to being touched so much, but she wasn't about to complain, she liked it, probably more than she should.

"I know I made it seem like you didn't have a choice but to come to the cabin with me for the holidays, but I wouldn't have fired you if you'd told me you didn't want to come. Don't get me wrong; I really need your help. Still, you made it clear how important it is for you to spend Christmas with your parents."

"It still is. I really do hope they can join us next week," Mary said softly.

"Well, how about this? If your parents aren't able to make it up here the day before Christmas Eve, I'll take you back home and I will come back to get you the day after Christmas," he offered.

Mary's eyes locked shortly with his as he turned his attention back to the road. "Wouldn't that be a lot of trouble? Mary asked.

"Of course not. I'm not an ogre, you know." He teasingly winked at her.

Mary felt her cheeks warming. "I didn't think you were. An occasional ass maybe, but you're too handsome to be an ogre."

Alec's mouth spread into a wide grin. "You think I'm handsome?"

"Why am I not surprised that you ignored my insult and accepted the compliment?" Mary rolled her eyes at him and clicked her tongue.

"I guess it's because I know I'm an ass, but I hardly get called "handsome".

Mary couldn't hide the skeptical look that came to her face. "Oh please! You're called handsome in the media all the time."

"That doesn't count; they don't know me and it doesn't matter what they think. It pleases me that you find me handsome.

"You're serious?" Her face was unmasked surprise. "Why?"

"Because if you find me handsome, half the job of getting you to fall head over hills is already done."

Mary looked at him, her breath caught in the back of her throat. She spotted the teasing crinkles around his mouth before he finally gave into the need to laugh.

She should have known he was just joking. Mary chuckled playing off her embarrassment and said, "I take it back. I don't think you're handsome after all."

"Too late because not that I know it can't be taken back." Alec stated his eyes focused on the road. "If it makes you feel any better I think you're pretty."

Blushing profusely and trying not to grin like an idiot, she returned her attention towards the view outside the passenger window. "I thought the weather said no snow accumulations today.

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From the looks of it, it's not going to stop anytime soon and it's sticking."

"It's not unusual," he replied, clearing his throat. "It's a dry snow, so we shouldn't have any visual problems and I have my snow chains if needed."

Mary moaned. "What'll happen if no one else can make it up to the cabin next week or we can't leave to go to my parents."

"Then I guess it's just you and me kid." Alex stated in his worse Bogart Imitation.

"That has to be the worse, Humphrey Bogart, imitation I've every heard." Mary shook her head. "Are you ever serious about anything?"

His eyebrows arched in surprise. "I'm usually accused of being too serious, about everything except relationships, of course."

"You know I've heard that rumor too, but I have yet to see it." She grinned.

He grunted. "I guess you bring out the kid in me, Ms. Mary Christmas."

"The jury is still out deciding if that's a good thing or not." Mary said enjoying the ease of conversation that transpired between them whenever they were alone.

"Since you brought it up, would it bother you if we found ourselves snowed in and cut off from the rest of the world for a few days?" he asked

Mary didn't have the nerve to look at him, not now when she was feeling so exposed. A part of her wanted to shout she would love to be with him no matter where they were or the circumstances, but it wasn't feasible to say such things to her employer.

Alec was just a flirt and she wasn't stupid enough to take anything he said seriously when it came to his whimsy teasing.

"I checked the weather report before we left and the last big snow storm they had up here was three years ago. So, we probably have no worries. You won't get stuck with just me for the holidays and I'm sure you'll get to make your engagement official as planned." Mary forced a lighthearted smile. Mary thoughts of Alec marrying bothered her, and she had no right to feel agitated, but she was.

"You're probably right," he replied without tone. "I'm sure being stuck out here with me for Christmas would be a fate worse than death since you probably think of me as Ebenezer Scrooge."

Mary started to protest and decided it was best to allow him to believe what he wanted to believe. If she allowed him to continue thinking she thought the worse of him, the easier it would be to keep things strictly business between them.

"I didn't see a wedding date scheduled on your calendar yet." She looked at him out of the

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corner of her eyes. His hands tightened on the steering wheel of the vehicle. "The reason I bring it up is because, I saw your schedule was pretty full for next six months. I figure you would like to have at least 2 to 3 weeks for the wedding and the honeymoon."

"We haven't even discussed a date yet," Alec said in a low composed voice. "No need to worry at the moment. I'm sure I can make all the necessary changes if the need arises."

"If?"

"Err...*when*, we make a firm decision."

He gave her a smile that sent her pulse racing. She found it impossible not to return his disarming smile.

Mary craned her neck to take it all in as Alec turn off the main road leading towards an overlook that housed the Mercer holiday home. The rambling log house laired on the edge of an overlook opened to an impressive view of the mountain backdrop and the quaint town below.

The windshield wipers swished back and forwardly as Alec turned up the speed. The snow was coming down heavier; huge flakes covering the ground around them. He circled a large frozen-over fountain centerpiece in a cobbled courtyard and rolled to a stop in front of the house. Already Mary could imagine how beautiful it would be once it was decorated for Christmas; she couldn't wait to get a look inside.

"Do you like it?" Alec asked as he shifted the gear into park, leaving the vehicle idling to keep the warmth of the heat going in the car.

"Oh, Alec, what's not to like? It's wonderful," she spoke eagerly. Do you and your family decorate the outside for Christmas?"

"Of course," he answered indulgently. "I have caretakers that stay on the property all year around and they will help me string up the lights and put up the garland."

Her eyes twinkled as she turned towards him. "Alec, I want to help decorate, is that okay?"

"I was counting on you helping me get this place in order before the others get here. How about you have your way inside, treat it like it was your own home." A wide grin thinned his lips. "The fellas and I will concentrate on the outside."

Surprised, Mary beamed at the vote of confidence he had in her. He was allowing her free rein of his family home and for some reason it warmed her heart, but she didn't want his family or fiancée to get the wrong idea.

"What if once your family arrive, they don't like what I've done to the place?"

"You worry too much, Mary. My parents are the most laid back two people you will ever meet and they'll appreciate anything you do, and most of all they will like you." He assured her.

"How can you be so sure?"

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"I'm sure, because *I* like you and most of the time my parents respect my instincts," Alec explained

"Most of the time?" Her brow puckered in curiosity.

"I guess you might as well know since you're going to be in the midst of it all." Alec released his seatbelt and turned to stare at her, his arm resting on the steering wheel. "My mother is against my proposing to Erica and things get a little tense when those two are together."

"This is the same mother that is laid back and you told me I have nothing to worry about?"

His mouth curved into an unconscious smile. "I believe you and my mom will get along swell because..." his voice drifted as if he wasn't sure if he should finish.

"Because?" Mary encouraged him to continue.

Alec shrugged. "I don't know, don't take this the wrong way, but there is a warmth...a tender way about you that reminds me of my mother. I think that's why I feel so comfortable around you and I feel as if I can share anything with you."

Mary released a long inward groan. This was great. It was what every woman wanted from a man she was attracted to—to be seen in the same light as *his mother—not!*

Instead of speaking what she was thinking, she said, "Well, that's great. I'm sure we will get along. Hey, we can even exchange recipes!"

His mouth twisted wryly. "You did take it the wrong way."

"No problem. I assure you every woman my age, longs to be seen as a man's mother." Mary said smoothly with no expression on her face.

She gasped as his hand darted out and clasped her chin in his long fingers.

"Look into my eyes Mary." He ordered.

She did as she was told and the double meaning of his look was very obvious. Something intense flared through his entrancement. The tingling in the pit of her stomach increased. His stare traveled over her face, and searched her eyes.

Mary had to fight her overwhelming need to be close to him. She remembered what it felt like to be crushed within his embrace. If he wanted to take her right now in this car she was powerless to resist, because her curiosity was aroused and he had stoked the gently growing fire that was simmering deep inside her.

His stare became as soft as a caress.

"Do you think I look at my mother this way?"

The sound of his deep voice affected her deeply. She could actually feel the muscles of her vagina clenching and heated moisture spreading in her growing state of arousal. Her large nipples harden against the cups of her bra. If he were to move his hand down and stroke a thumb

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across one of them, she would surly come from just his touch.

Mary licked her lips nervously. "I surely hope not," she answered his question.

Alec leaned towards her and she lifted her face towards his. They were so close she felt the heat of his breath. He stopped. She kept her features deceptively composed. For an instant wistfulness stole into his expression and it was replaced with an inexplicable look of withdrawal. He released her face and drew back.

"May...maybe, we should be getting inside," he murmured. "Stay put until I come over there. The cobblestone may be slippery."

Disappointed she turned away, masking the heat of embarrassment that spread across her face. "Alec, I'm sorry. I really am looking forward to helping to get your home ready for Christmas. I didn't mean to sound ungrateful. I know I'm here to work on the documents, but it's nice of you to give me the opportunity to still do the things I would be doing if I were home with my family."

"I'm the one who is sorry. What I did was out of line, yet again." He released a long frustrated sigh. "I'm very grateful, Mary, even if I'm an ass about showing it. Agreeing to work is all that I have the right to ask of you. Please, if you wish to decorate, please feel free to do so."

"Alec--"

"I'll have the caretakers get the Christmas stuff down from the attic and you can go through it and use what you want. Just know, that I will understand if you would rather spend your free time partying with the townspeople and making this a semi-vacation too."

"Alec, it was I that asked to help with decorating the house for the holidays, so trust me I don't feel as if I'm doing you any big favor here. Besides, I look forward to the distraction; that way, I won't spend the entire time worrying if my father's cold has worsened."

He turned to look at her and despite his closed expression she sensed his vulnerability.

"Thank you," he said softly. "I want to say it now just in case I forget to do so later."

"You're welcome." She was unable to tear her eyes from his face. She gave him a warm smile before asking, "Before we go in and get started is there anything or room that is off limits?"

"Nope, I meant it when I said think of it as your home for the next few weeks. The only thing that we can't do is decorate the tree, once it's delivered." Alec returned her smile, his demeanor relaxing once again. "A day or two before everyone is set to start arriving we have a standing order for a live pine tree to be delivered and once everyone arrives, we decorate it as a family."

Mary studied his profile and smiled as he continued to speak about his family.

"We'll belt out some Christmas tunes, while my Aunt Lucille plays the piano. Mother, will

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serve her infamous homemade hot apple cider. Be forewarned that stuff packs a sneaky punch. Drink it lightly, and don't let my Uncle Arthur convince you there is hardly any brandy in it, just because he is can drink all night and not be phased."

"It sounds wonderful." Mary laughed. "It seems our families have more in common then I imagined."

"I'm sure we will find we have more in common, then not, Mary."

"Do you have heirloom ornaments?"

"Several, some going as far back as the seventeen hundreds. They've been passed down from my mother's mother, and so on," he answered.

Envy and sadness came over Mary.

Alec noticed and commented. "What gives? Did I say something wrong?"

"No, of course not, it's just..."

"What?"

"I always envied those that could pass on their items so that their children and generations could have an idea of where they came from. Unfortunately for my family, and many other African American families we don't have those historical treasures. I mean, we do, but a majority of us don't, or it may go back as far as late eighteen or early nineteen hundreds."

Alec pursed his lips in silent understanding.

"It's hard enough for us to trace our family tree because of lack of records and files kept on slaves after they were sold. Even if you find out what happened to them, the trail can grow cold if the new owner wasn't as diligent in his record keeping or if they were freed then it seems to lead to...nothing."

"Truthfully, I never really thought much about what those old ornaments represented to my mother, I notice she cherishes them. After hearing how you feel I'm going to really look at the heirlooms."

"Don't just look at them Alec, while you still have your mother around, ask her if she knows the story behind the ornaments. Not all of them may have a tale, but I'm sure there is a Christmas past memory in there somewhere." Mary spoke with a quiet firmness.

"It would be something worth knowing to pass on to my children someday," Alec reasoned. "I know for some African American, their past are very vague, but there are a few Caucasian families that understands how you feel. It was only fortunate for us that our ancestors managed to salvage most of the things we have today especially something so delicate as those Christmas ornaments, during the migration from Europe to America. A lot of the families items were stolen, broken or sold during lean war times."

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“True. Still, you have all this knowledge of your history. I don’t even know if we ever had anything precious to lose during war times. For my ancestors, it probably felt as if it was always lean times.” She explained. “My Granny’s gone now, but I remember her telling me many stories of her childhood and her parents childhood. Things were very hard on them, but no matter what, they kept the family together and they always had food on the table.”

Mary’s eyes watered as she struggled with the recurring feelings of grief that comes around the holidays when she realized some loved ones were going to be forever missing. Even though it has been a couple of years since her mother’s mother died, it still pained her terribly.

“Mary, I hate to see you upset, it makes me want to--” Alec paused.

“Want to what?” She chanced asking.

“It makes me want to take you in my arms and hold you,” he confided. “However, I won’t.”

She bent her head to look at her hands clinched together in her lap. She didn’t want to chance looking at him, not in her vulnerable state. “I understand.” She nodded and continued to listen.

“You helped me the other night with my feelings over losing my brother. Losing a loved one is a pain that we all share, no matter what our race, history, or standing is in this world, it’s a universal understanding.” Alec released a long shuddering breath. “I don’t believe my words are good enough to sooth you. I’m sorry.”

“That’s not it.” Mary sniffled while wiping away a tear from her cheek. “Alec, I know I shouldn’t be thinking this, but I like how it feels when you hold me. It’s practically all I’ve thought about since you kissed me. Still--”

“You don’t have to say it, Mary. I know what I did was inappropriate.” His dark head dropped low. “I can’t apologize for doing it, but I can promise that I will try to not overstep the boundaries again.”

She couldn’t resist looking at him and wish she hadn’t as their eyes caressed, kissed and clung to one another in ways they dare not mimic.

“Come on, it looks like the snow has lightened up a bit. Let’s go inside, while the getting is good.” Alec suggested.

Mary sat in silence and waited for Alec as he made his way to the passenger-side and opened her door. Quietly she eased her hand in his and thanked him as he helped her step down. As soon as her booted feet hit the ground, she felt them give from beneath her. Mary released a squeal of alarm as her arms flailed to maintain her stance as his hands shout out to catch her falling forward against his strong awaiting frame. He didn’t even stumble backward as she hit against him.

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She held on to his suede and lambs wool coat while he held her in his arms. Nervous laughter bubbled from the both of them as they looked at each other.

“Are you okay?”

“No.” Mary smiled and sniffled. The thin mountain air made breathing difficult causing her nose to run. She must look a mess, but there was no help for it or the fact that the damp snow was causing her hair to frizz, at least she had been smart enough to pull it up in a ponytail. “I’m scared that I’m going to bust my butt if I try to move. If I knew the weather was going to get crazy I would have worn different shoes.”

“Just stand here a moment longer and get your bearings. I will help you up the steps and come back and get the bags out of the car.” His hold tightened and he shivered, she didn’t know if it was because of the cold or if he was feeling the same sweet intensity she was feeling while being in his arms.

“Thank you, I don’t want to break something and be completely useless to help out around here.” She shook her head in embarrassment. “I think I’m ready now if you want to try and make it to the door.”

As if she hadn’t spoken, he grinned down at her, his voice sounded tight as he spoke. “It seems as if we always end up in this position lately.”

She managed a laugh. “I guess if you hadn’t been curious about my lips and I wasn’t clumsy it wouldn’t happen at all.”

“I suppose I ought to loosen my hold on you and help you inside the house,” he murmured, but made no move towards the door, instead he held her even tighter against his body, his chin resting in the damp softness of her hair.

She tightened her hold around his waist. “Alec, do you realize how crazy this is? We barely even know each other,” she sighed, allowing herself to soak up his warmth. Mary leaned into his embrace; and the reasons for them not to be touching like this seemed lost in the moment.

“I feel as if I do know you,” he said. “And holding you like this feels right to me.”

“Alec, you’re about to be engaged to another woman, for God’s sake. You may be accustomed to casual affairs of the heart, but I’m not.” Mary snapped and eased back in his loosened hold, yet he didn’t let her go.

“I don’t know what to tell you, sweetheart.” Alec shrugged. “I’m not going to lie to you. Yes, I’ve had my share of one-night-stands and casual affairs, but my heart has never come into play before. So these feeling I have for you are unsettling and confusing.”

“How can you be saying these things to me Alec, when this weekend you plan on proposing to the woman you love? It’s not fair for you to do this to me,” she said with uneasy defiance.

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"Mary I don't love Erica and she doesn't love me. We have more of an agreement. We fit each other's current lifestyle," he admitted honestly. "Lately, I've been questioning what I think I need and what will make me happy. It's confusing, to say the least."

"Well, if you consider Erica fitting, then where do I *fit* in? If she is anything like your usual choices of women, then I think that gives me my answer," Mary said bitterly.

"Mary--" Alec's face showed his irritation.

"You know what," Mary interrupted. "This confusion you're going through is something I don't want to be a part of it. I won't be your temporary distraction while you get your shit together," Mary protested. She tried to push his hands aside and he didn't let her budge.

Nose to nose with her, his face crumpled into a sudden grin. "Ms. Mary Christmas, cursing? Am I becoming a bad influence on you?"

"Alec, this isn't funny."

"I know...you're right. Nevertheless, since we're standing this close and I'm freezing my ass off, wouldn't you like to at least throw your hat in the ring and kiss me to help sway my decision?"

"What is this a joke?" Mary squealed. "I know that look, Alec Mercer! Don't even think about kissing me again."

With both hands, he clasped her face, then leaned forward and kissed her. This time, his kiss was even deeper, more intimate than the first time, as if he was trying to convince her he would be worth fighting for. Why should she?

While his mouth hungrily slipped against and nibbled on hers, she felt like he'd already made up his mind to choose her. Maybe, it could be wishful thinking on her part.

Desire burned within her, hot and steady, making her feel as if she was spiraling out of control, her cold fingers gripped his coat into her fist. Alec was hard in all the right places, his body carved to fit her in spite of their height and weight differences.

She opened her mouth, giving his tongue access to tango with hers. In response, she received a chesty moan. Her lips started out cold from the outside temperature but they were warm and pliable now beneath his heat.

Mary realized she was getting the hang of this kissing and Alec was an excellent teacher. She matched his movement; giving as well as she had to give. The one thing she realized was it wasn't enough. She wanted more, but not just Alec as her lover; she wanted everything that came with it. She deserved to be more than the "other woman". If he didn't know what he wanted, she didn't want to waste her hope and dreams on him.

Mary broke the kiss, using her hands to keep him from continuing. She noticed it took him a

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moment longer to realize she was no longer returning his kiss.

“Stop this, Alec.”

“Mary...” He backed up, dropping his hands to his side. “I didn’t mean to get carried away.”

She made eye contact with him. “I want you. So much in fact, that I was willing to lay down here on this cold ass ground and let you make love to me, if you wanted. However, I can’t because you don’t *love me* Alec.”

“I admitted I wasn’t sure about what I was feeling. I don’t think I ever been in love Mary, not really. But I do know I have feelings for you that I wish to explore. Honey, I’ve never felt this way before.” He took her cold hands in his, rubbing them between his to warm them.

“If I was more experienced in these things I would say let’s go in the house and stay in bed until we figure out,” Mary gave him a half smile. “But I’m not that type of girl, when I make love it will be because I plan on spending the rest of my life with that man. We are like night and day when it comes to sexuality.”

“Your idea of staying in bed until we figure it out sounds promising to me,” he said gesturing toward the house. “The caretakers have warmed the house in anticipation of our arrival. There are fresh sheets on all the beds, and we can bless all six bedrooms.” He caressed her cheek.

Mary chuckled and shook her head slowly. “Alec, I’m still a virgin and I haven’t stayed one this long to give it away on the possibility that you may be in love with me and just not realize it yet.”

“Fuck! I really feel like a leech now.” Alec looked up at the sky and closed his eyes briefly before opening them to stare at her. “Why didn’t you say something? I didn’t think virginity for women in our age bracket these days were even a possibility.” Alec placed some distance between them.

Mary sighed; she had seen this reaction time and time again once they found out where she stood. Why would she think Alec was different from the other men that she had developed attractions for?

Alec was after all, a well-publicized louse, when it came to women. There was no way she could entice him into a marriage with infidelity being a given, when women more beautiful and more experienced haven’t been able to convince him. He couldn’t even be loyal to the woman he had planned to ask to marry him, or he wouldn’t have been standing here kissing her that way.

“Thank you for telling me, because I would never have known after that hot kiss you just gave me.” Alec voice was dangerously low.

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"That's because I'm not stupid," she said defensively. "I kissed you back the way you were kissing me."

"Mary, I'm only a man and at this time, I'm a man that wants to make love with you desperately, but yes, this changes everything. I don't want the responsibility of taking your virginity. That is something I couldn't give back to you, if it turned out we weren't compatible."

Mary sighed and lifted her chin in a stubborn stance. "Of course not, when it comes to love, I don't believe you have it in you to be responsible of another's feelings. It's all about your physical needs."

She saw him flinch but didn't care. She would be lying if she denied she felt hurt by his statement. "This brings us to one conclusion."

Alec's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Which is?"

"That I don't think working together would be a good idea." Mary looked him in the eyes and said, "Tomorrow, I will be returning home, you can either take me or point me towards an airport, bus, or train. I can't work for you. I don't want whatever this is between us to continue to grow until we do something or say something we can't take back."

"So, I don't get a choice in the matter?" Alec's voice was barely above a controlled whisper.

"You just did and you couldn't accept the responsibility, remember?" She lifted her chin meeting his icy gaze straight on.

"I will call Ally, and tell her to get back on the hunt to find me a temporary, that is until I can permanently fill the position. As for you returning home, I brought you here, and I will personally see to it that you safely return home."

"Thank you," Mary said in a clipped voice. Without further assistance, she made her way to the door and waited for him to join her. The tension between them remained heavy in the air. It took everything she had to give the pretend impression of total indifference. Regardless of her brave speech, she wanted Alec to be her first and only lover, but having only his desire would never be enough for her. Mary wanted to know the love she seen between her parents and grandparents or nothing at all.

Now she had to make it through the night then she could put Alec Mercer behind her for good; or so she told herself. Believing she would be able to forget the brief moments they had shared was another matter completely.

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CHAPTER SIX

Alec stepped out of his bedroom, freshly showered and changed, to the smell of food. He made his way to the kitchen; his bedroom suite was located downstairs, so he only had to walk to the center of the spacious household to reach the large kitchen.

Stopping in the open doorway he was surprised to find Mary, changed into blue jeans and a tie-die kimono blouse, moving about the kitchen. Her dark brown hair appeared damp, and she seemed to regain some semblance of control over the soft adorable frizzy mess it had been when they first arrived.

The current hairstyle Mary wore, he believed Ally called it French braiding. When his best friend's hair was longer in high school, she would braid her hair before every basketball game swearing to some day cut it off. The day Allison sheered her hair they were in their junior year of college and finally she told her parents she was gay.

Mary looked absolutely at home in his kitchen. His eyes took in the deep curve of her back that swelled into generously proportioned hips and bottom. The thickness of her thighs tensed as she stood on her tiptoes to remove some spices from the upper cabinet over the range.

Alec felt his cock harden and he stifled a moan, wondering how stupid could he be thinking he had asked Mary to work for him because she was frumpy and undesirable. She was wearing the hell out of those jeans. *Damn.*

Ally was right about Mary. She had all the requirements of his dream girl or at least his requirements since he first started noticing girls in a sexual way. Regardless of fooling himself into believing he was no longer attracted to big women, he realized the truth; he liked his women, big, cuddly, and soft.

After taking a shower and thinking about the conversation that had transpired between them earlier, he realized he might have made a grave mistake. In a way, this was no different than what he'd always done. When it came to women, he never made good choices. Alec dated to impress and for once, here stood a woman that asked...no, demanded more of him.

His desire for Mary was personal. He knew in his heart she not only looked good to him, she would feel good. She made him feel good; too good, as a matter-of-fact.

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The question now is what was he going to do about it after he insulted her for being a virgin. That had to be the stupidest thing he'd ever done to date. What man wouldn't feel pride in being a woman's first? Still, if nothing else he had to be sure because of that same reason.

What he needed to figure out is if he should listen to what his heart wanted or if he should continue to worry about what others thought about him and marry a woman more acceptable to his standing in his social circle, like Erica. Did he really need the hassles of an interracial relationship?

Alec swallowed back the bitter bile in the back of his throat; it made him sick to think he had become the type of man that would even be thinking such racist thoughts. When did he start to give a fuck about what others thought? His parents didn't raise him to think this way. Was Ally right? Had it all started way back in his early school years?

Mary made it clear she was attracted to him, but in the end could she fall in love with a man that has spent his entire life being shallow and insincere to women? The more Alec's thoughts lingered on his faults the more he was beginning to feel like he didn't deserve someone as sweet and sincere as the woman standing before him. He had his own Virgin Mary with the last name, Christmas. She truly was a gift.

Silently with a contented smile on his lips, Alec continued to appreciate the domestic scene unfolding before him. For the briefest of moments, his mind flashed to a high chair pushed up to kitchen table with Mary feeding a cherub-faced infant that was a combination of him and her. He shook his head. The emotions this picture brought forth were overpowering and he realized it was something he was ready for.

Alec released an inward curse. Why hadn't he taken some time to evaluate his feelings before he shot off his mouth to Mary earlier? She basically told him she was interested yet hesitant. What did he do? Did he reciprocate her interest? No! He stupidly told her that he wasn't interested in a virgin, when inside he was thrilled at the thought of becoming her first and only lover. Why didn't he tell her that, instead?

"Tell me, Alec Mercer, do you like what you see? You've been standing there quietly watching me for some time."

Alec face reddened. He'd been caught.

"Huh? I...I was looking at that delicious steak you're frying up in the skillet," he feigned.

"I hope it's okay this way for you. I prefer it cooked this way in butter instead of broiling in the oven."

"I'm easy when it comes to food; but Mary, I don't expect you to cook for us. I could have called down to the bunker house and had the chef to fix something."

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"If the 'chef' is George, he came by and offered and I asked if it was okay for me to use the kitchen. He was very nice and showed me around," she explained. "I love cooking it relaxes me."

Alec moved further into the kitchen and leaned his butt against the edge of the gray marbled countertop watching her as she checked a couple of huge potatoes wrapped in aluminum foil and baking in the oven.

"Is your room okay?"

"It's cozy and perfect, thank you." Mary stated moving away from him. He watched her walk over to the refrigerator. She removed a large glass bowl of what appeared to be mixed lettuce and tomatoes and returned to stand in front of him.

Mary thrust the salad bowl against his abdomen. "Make yourself useful and put this on the table, please, and while you're there you might as well set the table."

Without commenting he made his way to the kitchen table.

He was Alec Mercer, and very seldom did anyone order him about, other than his parents. They were proud of his accomplishments but not overly impressed by anything he did. He saw his father more excited when he hit a homerun in little league, then when he got the award for "Business Man of The Year". Yet here was this woman ordering him about his own kitchen and it foolishly made him feel warm and domesticated. He wondered if this is what marriage is like?

"Hey Alec? Are you okay?"

He and Mary exchanged glances.

He grunted. "No, I'm fine, but I wanted to speak to you about something that I've been thinking about since we spoke earlier."

"All right. Why don't you get us something to drink and I will fix our plates."

"I could use a beer. I know you don't like the taste of alcohol; do you want a soft drink of some kind? We got a little bit of everything."

"I saw a pitcher of lemonade in the fridge, how about that?"

"No problem."

Alec took his seat across from Mary. His savory meal consisting of steak, salad, baked potato, and two slices of garlic bread rested before him. He wondered if he should speak now, or wait until after dinner.

"Thank you, Mary. Everything looks and smells delicious." He sliced and forked a piece of well-seasoned sirloin steak in his mouth. From that point on another word didn't leave his lips.

They ate in companionable silence. Alec cleaned his place with the third piece of garlic bread Mary gave him from her plate with a lifted eyebrow. He was embarrassed that he was

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being greedy, but he accepted it and sopped up the last of the buttery juices left on his plate from the steak.

"I won't even have to put that plate in the dishwasher," Mary laughed. "Would you like me to fry you up another one, big boy?"

Alec grinned from ear to ear leaning back in his seat with a loud contented groan he rubbed his stomach and released a rude belch, covering his mouth. "Oops, sorry, but that burp was a compliment to the cook. I don't think I've met a woman other than my mother that has cooked me such a satisfying meal. When he stood he asked, "I'm getting another beer, would you like a refill on the lemonade?"

"Yes, thank you."

Upon his return, he could see Mary had finished her meal from the crumpled paper napkin in her plate, but she hadn't cleaned her plate. "You looked like you barely touched your meal. Are you feeling okay?"

"Yeah, I guess I wasn't as hungry as I thought I was."

Alec handed her the glass and suggested, "Why don't you bring your lemonade and we can go and sit by the fireplace and talk."

"Okay, but what about the dishes?" She pushed back and stood.

"I will put them in the dishwasher before I turn in for the night."

He noticed her skeptical look.

"Hey, I'm not helpless, I use to bust my tail as a griller and dishwasher to pay for my school books." He took a hefty swig of his beer.

"Really? That's something I can say I hadn't read about you?"

"I think that's our problem, Ms. Mary Christmas. You have these crazy ideas based on my very public persona, but I would like us to get to know one another." He grinned. "What do you say? That's what I want to speak with you about. I want to ask you can we start over? Not as employer and employee, but as a man and woman trying to get to know more about each other."

Mary cocked her head to the side as if she was surprised to hear him make the request, which he couldn't blame her. In a matter of a few hours he'd did a complete one-eighty in his thinking.

Mary gave him a closed lips smile and said, "Lead the way; there is a fireplace in every room, so I have no idea, where you want to go. This place is cozy with all this beautiful pine wood walls and flooring, but it's huge."

"You'll get use to it," he assured.

"Not in one day, I won't," she murmured. "After tomorrow it won't matter, I will be out of

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your life...forever.”

Alec cringed at her words, it seemed so final and left him without much hope of changing her mind, but he didn't get where he was by giving up so easily. He wanted to be with Mary, no one else, but her. Whether she accepted him or not, he knew one thing for sure, he couldn't ask Erica to marry him.

Silently he prayed that the predicted overnight snow showers would arrive in time to force Mary to stay with him regardless of how this conversation proceeded.

Still, just in case he couldn't depend on the weather, he must convince her to give him at least one week. If at the end of the week she still didn't feel he was sincere or could be trusted, he would get her back home before his family and friends were set to arrive.

No one would be the wiser and save her from any media speculations about who she is and why he was being seen around town with her. This too was another aspect of his life that he wondered if Mary would be able to accept. Not everyone could adapt to living in the limelight.

In the media family room, he motioned with beer bottle in hand for Mary to sit on the brown soft leather sofa. With the push of a button the gas fireplace sparked and flared. Alec dropped down next to her, leaving enough space between them to be comfortable.

He placed his half-full beer bottle down on the decorative wooden tray that rested in the center of the zebra print foot-table. Picking up a remote Kenny G playing renditions of Christmas songs filtered out of the hidden stereo speakers. He put the remote down.

“Comfortable?” He shifted and tugged at his jeans, the crotch feeling tighter by the minute. The more time he spent with her the more he found her beautiful, glasses and all. Especially now as the soft light in the room cast a golden glow over her brown skin.

“Yes, but you don't seem to be.” Mary commented. “I can tell something has been on your mind, even through dinner you were very quiet. Are you fearful that I won't be able to get out of your hair come morning because of the weather? Would it be that bad if you had to spend a few days alone with me?”

He was amazed that she seemed to be able to read him so well, but she was wrong he was more fearful that he wouldn't have any more time with her.

Alec turned to the side with one knee crooked on the sofa. He eased his arm along the back of the sofa behind her, leaning forward slightly, invading her space as much as he dared. He didn't want to move too fast, nor did he want her to think he was putting some typical jet-setting playboy moves on her.

“I have thought about nothing else since our conversation and-- ”

Mary shook her head and said, “Look, Alec, I know it has to be annoying to have me under

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the same roof as you are. I know my reactions to your advances were childish, considering you're used to more experienced women in these matters. Trust me, now that I know my being a virgin is not to your liking, I won't make any more heartfelt confessions. I got the message and I understand, some men aren't into virgins, black women, or big women and I got all of these going for me."

"That's not it at all. I've been thinking about it...us. Mary, since I kissed you again earlier, I have relived the moment. It felt right, you felt right in my arms and something tells me if I don't explore these feelings I have for you I will regret it for the rest of my life."

"Alec," she whispered his name and licked her lips.

He had the driven urge to kiss her again, but refrained, not sure if it would be welcomed.

"Alec," she repeated. "What exactly are you saying?"

"I want you to stay, Mary," he uttered and held his breath waiting for her to shoot all his hopes to hell. It was what he deserved, after telling her because she was a virgin, he wasn't interested.

Mary went still. "What's changed in the matter of a few hours? I haven't. I'm the same woman, you spoke to earlier; nothing, has changed for me."

"Nothing? Not even the attraction you have for me?" His eyes lit up with hope.

She looked him in the eyes. "Nothing."

"Well, something has changed for me," Alec admitted with a shrug. "I've grown wiser. I realized I've been blessed with this wonderful gift, even though you've been under my nose all this time at the office, I was so blinded by what I thought I wanted, that I didn't know what *I needed*, until that moment you told me you couldn't remain by my side."

He was grateful she remained quiet and serene in her appearance during his confession or he didn't know if he would have been able to continue. This was awkward for him. He never discussed "his feelings" with a woman before.

"Mary, I realized that if I you returned home before we could explore whatever is going on between us, I would always wonder what would have happened between us if we were to allow things to progress naturally. I don't want to place any pressure on you but I want you to give me another chance."

"Are you sure? You see I need more than a casual sexual affair, Alec." She said before shaking her head and saying more passionately, "Hell no, I *deserve* more. Sex is not only something that makes you feel good, it's a spiritual bonding that is sacred. I know this, and I choose not to abuse this beautiful gift from God, unless I know the man I give this gift to is in it for all the right reasons."

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"I tell myself that it would be magnanimous of me to let you go, but that would mean that I was ignoring my feelings and it's time to face the truth. What I feel for you, Mary, it's not going to just go away because you are no longer here," he openly admitted.

"Whatever this is between us, it's growing stronger," she countered.

"Yes, it is." He reached out his hand caressing her the fullness of her cheek. "So, you do feel it too?"

"Yes, I admitted I felt something; but, Alec, what if you realize after I've fully vested my heart in you that I'm not what you're accustomed to, that I'm not enough of a challenge, or one day you wake up one day and really take a look at me without clothing--"

"Baby...baby...slow down." Alec cupped her face in his hands. "Do you truly think that low of me? Because if you do, then I'm truly going to have a time trying to convince you that I'm serious." He grinned. "Also isn't that a chance we all take when you try to build a relationship. Couldn't I ask you all of the same questions?"

She shrugged her round shoulders at him. "Still, it's not as if you've spent your adult life taking your relationships with women seriously or has everything I read in the news and around the office a lie? If you weren't sure just a couple hours that I was what you wanted, then how do I know that this isn't just another new game for you?"

"I won't lie and say I didn't give the gossipmongers something to talk about at time. By no means will you be getting a saint if you choose to give us a shot, but if you can't get past who you believe I am, or my past then there is no reason to have this conversation."

"I'm so obviously not perfect, so I don't expect it of you, but I don't know if I can learn to trust you to the point of intimacy."

Alec dropped his hands from her face. He looked into the burning fireplace. "So you're telling me it's hopeless? I could never possibly change or seriously fall for a virtuous woman, such as yourself, so I must have a motive, right?"

"No, I didn't say that, I just need some time," Mary reasoned. "You took time, which by the way isn't a flattering feeling for any woman. Now I need you do give me some time."

"It's because of the comment I made about you being a virgin, isn't it?"

"Partly, but also because I have you at a disadvantage."

"Meaning?"

"Well your life is practically an open book, hell, you have a biography on the library shelves," she chuckled.

Alec's mouth crooked into a half smile. Chagrined he said, "I always thought people should do those about you when you died, that is if someone felt inclined. That was

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unauthorized, by the way and I've never read it."

"My point is, I know more about you than you know about me. There is a reason, I've waited so long to have sex and it's not all moralistic."

"Such as?"

"Such as I don't really wish to discuss it, right now."

"Okay, so you are asking for time." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I can do that, regardless of the fact that I'm very attracted to you. Also, my attraction does not mean I don't still need your help, at least for this week."

"You still really want me to stay?"

"Yes," he replied instantly. "So do you still want to stay?"

Alec really wanted her to say yes. He needed her to remain in order to change her mind about him. He never had much faith in that Christmas wishing stuff his mother spoke each Christmas season, but if what she said was true then his personal wish would come true and the weather would grow worse overnight.

"Alec, I don't know--"

"Mary," he interrupted. "I suppose I made a mistake by taking you as a woman of your word. Maybe I should have drawn up that contract before we left after all." His eyes chanced a glance at her and he could see she was fuming. He squelched a smile. She really was adorable. "I could have sworn you promised to come here and help me get those contracts in order before they are due to go out for the new fiscal year."

"I can't believe you would even go there. You would still hold me to my word?"

He shrugged haphazardly. "Nope, what do I care if you can't be trusted to keep your word? I'm a businessman and I know how to not let my personal feelings get in the way of what needs to be done. It just proves to me that you are as unreliable as the rest of them, and maybe in your own unusual way had a motive for agreeing to come up here at all. I guess, all women say one thing, yet do another."

"I dare you to lump me up in the same group with those other women, Alec," she yelled at him and slapped his arm.

He risked another glance and she was doing the neck thing. Ally told him all about the neck thing when they were kids, but she was wrong about one thing; black women, weren't the only ones that did this neck thing.

Alec dated all kinds of women and when they were pissed at him, they all did the head thing. The difference was, Italian women did it while waving their hands in his face, Black women put their hands on their hips, White women tucked their hair behind their ear, and Asian women

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crossed their arms over their breast.

Mentally, he laughed. Women amazed the hell out of him; all of them thought they were so much different or better than the other one, but not to a man. To a man, they all sounded the same when they were pissed. Only this time, he was falling in love with the one currently yelling at him.

“Alec, why are you grinning?”

“I’m grinning, because I find you utterly adorable,” he said seriously. “Mary, I would love to explore what’s happening between us. I understand that this is new for the both of us and so far we don’t have any emotional investments, right?”

“If you say so,” was all she said.

What in hell did that mean, he wondered. Sighing, he continued. “Darling, if you don’t wish to go any further, then fine, I won’t push. We’re both adults and we can keep it professional from this moment.”

“Well, I know there is at least one adult between us.” She cut her eyes at him.

He should have been offended but he wasn’t. Alec laughed aloud.

Mary returned his smile and immediately he felt the tension between them ease. “So I suppose you’re saying you’ll finish out the week?”

“I did promise.”

“Great and I will drive you home at the end of the week,” Alec conceded aloud, but deep inside he was hoping she would spend Christmas and New Years Eve with him. “You can call your parents and let them know you’ll be home just in case your father gets better and they chance coming up sooner”

“Yeah, I think that would be better. It would be kind of awkward with me and my parents being here once your fiancée and her family arrives, it’s such a personal time for all of you, it wouldn’t be right for us to be here.”

“There has been a change of plans. Erica and her family will not be joining us.” He stared at her as he spoke gauging her reaction.

“I don’t understand, did they call and cancel?”

Was that hope he heard in her voice? “No, I’m going to call Erica tonight and let her know that it’s best if she doesn’t come. It’s not going to work out for us, I realize that now.”

“Just like that?” Disbelief showed on Mary’s face. “Isn’t that a bit harsh? We’re talking about a woman you were going to ask to marry you. You’re going to drop her over the phone? Hey, how about I just fax her a memo for ya and save you the trouble?”

He merely stared, tongue-tied. She was actually upset with him. He thought she would be

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happy he wasn't going to propose to Erica. She was an every-changing mystery to him.

"Mary, why are you so upset? I thought you would be happy!"

"What kind of woman would I be if I was happy at another woman's unhappiness? Besides, since we aren't even sure about what this is between us, I don't want to be the cause of you giving up someone that you loved enough to ask to be your wife," Mary explained spreading her hands wide. "This decision is too serious to not spend more time thinking about it."

"Please don't stress over this Mary. No matter what happens with you, I realized I want what you wanted. A marriage, like the one my parents have. I never really thought about the possibility of marrying for personal happiness. For so long I treated my entire life as a business transaction, even my personal life."

He grasped her hand.

"The women in my life gave me their bodies and I made sure they wanted for nothing. They were contented with that. It too, was a form of business to fulfill both our basic needs. Erica, cares for all that I represent to her socialite lifestyle. The reason I chose to marry her is because she's never pretended to love me and I didn't need love in my marriage. I thought I needed an heir, and a wife that complimented my position in life. Erica offered to give me those things and she doesn't need my money. She just needed my discretion and acceptance of her swinging lifestyle, while she gave her father what he wanted before he cut off her trust fund."

Alec treasured the feel of her fingers as they intertwined with his own. Unconsciously, her thumb was caressing over his and he could have sworn the blood in his veins going straight to his penis.

He released a shuddering sigh amazed by the things Mary did to his senses, by just her simple touches, and by being there. Even the way she looked at him gave him a feeling of warmth and most of all it gave him the ability to hope for things he never dared to before.

She touched his shoulder and softly said, "I had no idea that you were considering marrying for any other reason than the fact that you were in love with Erica."

Alec shook his head. "I thought love wasn't necessary because I had everything else I could want. I know with my parents, they always said it was their love that got them through the lean years when the four of us lived in a small two-bedroom home. I couldn't relate to that, because I'm fortunate to not have to know lean times. So I thought love was unnecessary."

"How could you have thought such a thing? Alec, it was also that love that got your parents through the death of losing your younger brother in Iraq. What good was money in helping to heal that pain?"

Alec never thought about it, but Mary was right. With all the money he had, he had felt

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useless to help his family through that great loss. He had thought using his money to open up a Veteran Memorial fund in his brother's name to help other families that came into financial hardships would help his family to heal.

He threw himself into working until he was exhausted to appease his guilt. It wasn't until his mother threw her foot down and yelled at him, something she rarely did. In her anger she told him she needed one thing and that was for him to stop using work as an excuse. They needed him, not things. She needed to know she had the love of the only child she had left. Alec hadn't realized it until Mary said something, but it was then the real healing began for his family.

"You're right, Mary. I thought money was the answer to all my problems. When I was younger, we didn't seem to have as much as other kids did. I didn't know then what I know now and that is, we had more than some of those kids. We had the attention of our parents."

Mary squeezed his hand and he found it comforting.

"Boy, I use to envy my friends back then." Alec shook his head. "I was taking the bus while all my friends had cars. They took summer vacations in the Hampton's while I spent it mowing yards and bagging groceries in the local stores. I always told myself one day I wasn't going to have to worry about being the sweaty kid looking into other people's window, wanting what they had."

"I never felt that pressure personally because I went to a school where most of the kids were middle class or poor," Mary voiced.

"I was in a private school. My parents worked overtime to keep me in there because they believed it would look better on my college entrance forms. They rarely saw each other. Mom would work days and Dad, nights. The only time we all got to sit at the table as a family was early mornings, and they spent most of the time discussing bills over breakfast. I wanted to take away all that stress from their shoulders. I made it my life's goal."

"Look at you now, you've achieved comfort and so much more." Mary touched his face for a moment. He found her touch reassuring. "Honey, don't you think it's time to reap the benefits and make happiness your new, life's goal?"

"That's exactly what I've been thinking about lately," Alec admitted. "I also asked myself, if I were to lose everything I have would Erica stay by my side?"

"Would she?"

"Of course not."

She nodded in agreement, but remained silent. She continued to hold and stroke his hand with her fingers. In some odd way, this simple comfort coming from her was enough to make him want to share things with her that he hadn't shared with Ally or his family.

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Taking and releasing a deep breath, Alec looked into her eyes and said, "Mary, recently I have been considering making a major change professionally. I've been thinking about relinquishing my workload by taking on shareholders for my company and franchising my name to smaller companies. If I agree this will free me up to do what I love to do."

"Isn't advertising what your first love?"

"No, that is what makes and keeps me rich." He wiggled his eyebrows playfully.

She giggled. "Now, you got me curious. What is it you rather be doing?"

"Painting," he confided his secret.

"Painting," she repeated. "Like what houses, or something?"

Alec threw back his dark head and laughed. "No, silly woman, I'm a true artist at heart. I paint landscapes and portraits."

Mary's chin dropped in surprise. "You're serious. Damn, that is a rumor that hasn't managed to circulate around the office. Can I see something you've painted, or is this something you're just now getting in to doing?"

"No, I've been painting for years but under an anonymous name."

"Wow," she sighed. "Have I seen anything you've done unknowingly?"

"In the lobby of the Mercer Office building everyday you come to work, one of my pieces you can see as you enter the door."

Mary rolled her eyes at him through her glasses. "Oh, now I know you're messing with me. You almost had me believing you, Alec because I don't know many artists works, but I know that one belongs to *Marceau Rubenesque*. I know because I own one of his prints. You might have seen it hanging in my living room."

A thoughtful smiled curved his lips. "You really like my work?"

"Oh, please, you probably wish you could paint like that." She released his hand and reached for her glass of lemonade. He watched her take a drink and replaced the glass on the tray before she continued, "Now that brotha knows how to beautify the full-figured woman. I can tell he has a true appreciation for women like me, even if it is the less popular point of view commercially."

"I'm not lying to you, Mary. Also, I hope you know, that the hanging on your wall is a print of the one I called, "Harmony in Curves", not the original." Alec quirked a brow asking, "What I'm curious about is why you would assume Marceau Rubenesque is a, what did you call it, *brotha*?"

"I don't know." Mary shrugged at him pursing her luscious lips in thought. He had to bite down on his inner bottom lip to keep from dragging her in his arms and kissing her foolishly. "I

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assumed he was, because his style seemed somewhat urban, yet classical. You know what I mean? I'm surprised you purchase his artwork to showcase at the office. Besides me that portrait is the only other big woman in the Mercer building," she teased.

"Okay I deserve that one," Alec chuckled shaking his head. "I put everything I had into creating Mercer Media Corp and I had no extra money to spare on artwork, therefore I used my own. I am, *Marceau Rubenesque*."

Mary continued to eye him skeptically. He sighed aloud, realizing they had a long way to go in getting to know one another, no relationship could grow without trust and it was obvious she didn't trust him. Alec wondered if it was due to his reputation, or men in general? Had a man hurt Mary in the past? It was the only way she would come to know who he really was, but she wasn't making it easy.

"Mary, as long as you can linger on my negatives, I guess it makes it easier for you to not let me inside your heart. Maybe you should tell me why a beautiful, intelligent woman like yourself has never been married and is still a virgin at your age?"

He saw her face close down. It made him even more curious to know her secrets, but he wouldn't dare force the issue, in fear of pushing her farther away.

"Alec--"

"It's okay Mary, you don't have to tell me unless you want to." Alec interrupted. "But I do need you to at least give me a chance. You can't get to know me if you don't believe a word I say."

"I know, I'm sorry," Mary conceded.

Alec wasn't oblivious to the relief he saw on her face after he told her she didn't have to tell him why she was still unattached.

"With that said, I want to tell you things about me that only few know so that you can draw your own conclusions from there. If you still aren't interested in discovering if there could be something between us, then I can walk away knowing I did all that I could to make you at the very least, give me a chance."

She nodded. "So, you really are...*Marceau Rubenesque*?"

"The print-copy you have in your living area, I did the first year of college, it was my first Rubenesque portrait. The model's name is Karen and she has the original, otherwise I would offer to replace the one you have with the one I did in oil. The print doesn't do justice to the original oil painting. Maybe one day I can take you to see the original."

She gave him a beautiful Mona Lisa smile and his heart stumbled.

"Oh my God, I'm listening, and I believe you, but it somehow feels surreal knowing the

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truth. You're nothing like I pictured this artist to be," Mary laughed aloud. "Alec, you are truly a wonderful artist. I love your work!"

"Even though I'm not a brotha?" He teased.

"Well you can't be completely perfect," she mocked.

"Is that why you won't give me a chance? You don't care to be with me because I'm white?"

Her eyes grew wide as if she was shocked that he would even suggest that she was against interracial dating. "Of course not, Alec, I'm just not big on dating, and color has nothing to do with it."

"So you do want to date, get married, and have children some day?"

"Look, I have hopes and dreams of love like every other woman. It's just not easy finding a man that can truly love me, as I am, flaws and all. I found out the hard way, even if a man accepted my weight they couldn't accept..."

"What Mary?" He leaned forward taking her hands between his. Seeing the turmoil on her face made him want to comfort her. He wanted to be the one she relied on to comfort her when she was down.

Alec could see himself falling in love with Mary, if he hadn't already. He had no experience in such matters of the heart, but he knew that he did want her to be some significant part of his life; if not as a lover, then maybe a friend.

"Alec, please," she shook her head.

"I told you stuff that few know about me, Mary. I even told you about the guilt I carry over my brother's death, and no one knows that, but you. Can't you share this with me?"

"I think," Mary pulled her hands from his and he felt an ache deep in the pit of his stomach. "I think it's getting late and after that long ride up here, I'm tired."

"Mary," he moaned.

"Alec, not tonight." She turned her pleading gaze on him.

Disappointed he nodded. "I understand." His green eyes glared into the dark brown orbs of her eyes for some sign that would give him hope. She was the first to look away.

"I'm sorry," she apologized rotating away from him. "I...I don't know if I can have an intimate relationship with anyone---no matter how much I may want to. Some things aren't changeable, no matter how many Christmas wishes I've made over the years."

"Maybe this time it's possible." He stared at her profile. "How about if the both of us wish for the same thing? All you have to do is tell me what you wish for, Mary."

"Alec," Mary chided. "Maybe some day I will tell you, but not today."

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Alec watched her as she stood and he joined her. He could see the tears forming in her eyes and realized he would get no more out of her tonight. "Sweet dreams, Mary." He murmured watching until she disappeared up the foyer steps to the second landing. He strolled over to the telephone and called Erica.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Mary looked at the digital clock on the bedside table as the number rolled over to 3:00 AM. She did manage to squeeze in at least two hours sleep before she roused up again to stare at the clock.

Sitting up on the side of the queen sized poster bed, her feet didn't reach the floor. This bed was higher off the ground than her bed at home, she wasn't use to having to climb bed-stairs to get into the bed. Why would anyone want a bed this high? It was just a longer drop to the floor when two hot and sweaty bodies were gyrating and rolling—

Damn, I have to stop thinking this way. I need something to do. “If I was at home I would have plenty to do. Hell, if I was at home I wouldn't be wondering if Alec Mercer slept in pajamas or naked?”

Mary slid down from the bed onto the cool polished pinewood floor. Naked as the day she was born she sauntered over to the settee at the foot of the bed and reached for an over-sized canary-yellow t-shirt. Easing the shirt over her head and arms, the hem dropped to just above her knees. Sitting on the settee she slipped on a pair of fuzzy yellow socks.

Mary was happy the household was asleep, because glancing in the mirror she thought she looked like an African American “Big Bird”. Giggling, she ran a hand through her bed-head hair and fluffed it out with her fingers.

With hands on her hips, she looked around the beautifully rustically decorated bedroom; heavy wooden furniture, soft curtains encasing shuttered windows. What she believed she liked most about the room was the large river stone fireplace. She had one of those plug in pretend fireplace stoves in the corner of her room to add ambiance, but a real working fireplace was much better.

Restlessly she made her way towards its warmth. She held out her fingers towards the flame thoughtfully becoming mesmerized by the flickering flames licking between the burning logs in its hearth. It was as if she had a huge nightlight in the room. There was something haunting about her dancing shadow splayed against the walls. It also gave her a feeling of loneliness.

Mary wondered if she should add another log and decided against it, because it may make

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the room too hot and she didn't need any more heat. Her skin felt prickly and she felt restless. After she left Alec, she was strung so tight she had to masturbate to get to sleep.

Other times that would have been enough to get her through the night, but for the first time afterwards she cried because she felt a loneliness, she'd never felt before. It wasn't easy to please yourself when you knew you had a man that made it clear that he desired you sleeping under the same roof.

Mary released a deep sigh. How silly was this? She wished for a handsome and sexy man to live out all her fantasies with and here she stood alone in this room with its big bed alone and miserable.

She didn't have a choice. When he saw her body, the scars, he would be disgusted and it would break her heart to find out Alec was like every other man. She wanted him to be different. She needed him to be special, to give her hope that there was someone in this world who could fall in love with her for who she was.

Alec was one of limited few in his position that didn't have an issue with women because of their size. His appreciation for the full-figure woman showed in his artwork.

Mary wondered if she was cursed. She finally found a handsome, successful and talented man and now she had to reveal her secret. How do you tell someone you're attracted to that you have a skin disorder? Not just a simple case of adult acne but one that caused her to have to be extra careful with intimacy, because her lover had to be as concerned for her health as she was.

She had yet to meet any man that wanted to vest that much thought into making love to someone. Also, it required a lot of trust on her part. Any man she was intimate with would have to be completely loyal and committed to her. If he were to sleep with another, and catch something, even the simplest STD could kill her. With her restricted capability to take antibiotics, her options once infected were limited, if not nonexistent.

Mary knew Alec's reputation and because of it she couldn't picture him being faithful only to her. Nor could she picture him being patient and understanding of her plight, considering he was known for ditching women who became too demanding of his time.

"Damn you, Alec." She moaned. "Why didn't you allow me to continue thinking the worse of you? Why did you have to show me your vulnerable side? Why did you tell me you were my favorite artist? I never would have taken this job if I knew there was a possibility you would be attracted to me."

Mary closed her eyes forcing back the tears that threatened to spill forth. She'd had the chance to grieve over her medical situation since diagnosed at seventeen. She finally found a way to live with what she couldn't change. Now this.

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She felt there was no way she could survive the fallout if she were to fall in love with Alec only to have him walk away from her once he saw her during a painful flare-up. The first and last attempt she made to become intimate with a man was a disaster; she couldn't bare it if Alec looked at her with the same disdain.

Once again, she looked at her surroundings. It had all the amenities a woman could ever desire. This was the perfect place to be happy and raise a family. She wondered how Alec could think of this as just a holiday getaway house.

Mary allowed herself to daydream. This was her home with Alec. Built with a sturdy and sound interior. They wouldn't have to worry about their children running loud and wild in the halls. She wondered if Alec wanted children, and if so, how many?

Shaking her head she massaged her temples moving away from the fireplace, it was causing too many fanciful thoughts. Flipping on the light switch, Mary made her way to the bathroom, plugged in her hot iron, and sat down to relieve her bladder. She was thankful the first thing she did after returning to her room was undo the damp braid and allow her hair to finish drying naturally.

Finishing up, she flushed the toilet and washed her hands while looking at herself in the mirror with a laugh. Her hair was all over the place and it was bad enough she had dark rings around her puffy eyes. Without sleep she couldn't do anything about the rings, but the hair, oh yeah, its got to go.

Within the hour, Mary worked her magic with a bottle of hair-oil and a flat iron and considering it was four in the morning, she looked good. She winked at herself in the mirror and said, "Now what in the hell am I going to do? I'm still not sleepy."

She decided to go downstairs; she saw some cocoa mix and mini-marshmallows in the kitchen cabinet earlier. Like a child sneaking out of her room on Christmas morning, she eased out into the hall and couldn't ignore the call of the long corridor with its glistening wooden floor, it looked like the length of a bowling lane.

Mary took off in a run and slid across the floor in her socks releasing a fit of giggles when she came to a halt, the picture of Tom Cruise in *Risky Business* came to mind. "Eat your heart out Tommy, I'm a better dancer." She did the butterfly and attempted to moonwalk her way to the staircase.

Halting at the top of the stairs she eyed the railing with a quirked brow, and shook her head in another fit of giggles as a wickedly childish thought came to mind.

"Oh hell, no, I can't be thinking of doing this. What if I break my fool neck or worse I wake up Alec and he have to scrape my big ass off his expensive pinewood floor?"

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She paused with pursed lips and eyed the wooden railing. “Hey, a girl only gets this chance once in a lifetime. No one is around but me and I’m not tellin’ no one.”

Mary snickered and held on to the top rail tucked her long t-shirt between her thighs with her free hand before hoisting one of her stocky legs over the handrail in a straddled position, but first, her heart was pumping adrenaline so fast she had to bite down on her back teeth to keep from bursting out loudly in nervous laughter.

“Oh shit, I can’t do this. It’s a lot higher up than I thought.” It never dawned to her that once she got this far she wouldn’t be able to go through with it. It seemed so easy for the people in the movies, but they probably were seventy-pounds lighter.

It felt sturdy enough, but it was the thought of landing that petrified her. “I really want to do this, because I hate being scared all the time. I’m scared to take chances, and most of all I’m scared of falling in love.”

“Then stop being scared Mary, and let go. Trust me to catch you.” A deep voice carried up the steps.

She gasped peeping over her shoulder to see Alec in dark robe and slippers at the bottom of the steps. She squealed and heard him chuckle.

“Shit, Alec, I was just...I...I couldn’t sleep.” Mary could feel her entire face burning and she groaned burying her face in her shoulder holding tightly to the banister. Her butt was up in the air and she was sure from where he was standing he could see she was naked beneath her clothing from the way the tucked t-shirt dipped into the crevices of her big ass!

What a horrible position to find herself in. If she tried to get off the banister he was going to get an eye full and if she slid down towards him as he suggested then she probably would squish him when he tried to catch her, along with getting an eye full.

Look and see what you’ve done this time, Mary. She could hear her mother talking in her head.

“Do you need me to come and help you?” Alec called up.

“I need you to go to bed so I can get my ass off this rail.” She yelled refusing to look and see if he was still eye balling her big butt.

“Lucky rail,” Alec murmured.

Mary gritted her teeth and slid a little lower her hold on the top rail was becoming perilous as her fingers started to go numb. “Alec, good night,” she grunted.

“May I ask, why you are on my staircase banister at four something, in the morning?”

“I told you I couldn’t sleep,” she snapped.

“I see,” Alec grinned. “I have a bottle of over the counter sleep aid if you would like. I

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think it's more relaxing then this."

She could hear the laughter in his voice. "Oh, damn."

"However, if you hump the rail in your own home to get to sleep, please feel free to enjoy mine. I'm sure it will still respect you tomorrow," he teased.

"Grrr," she growled at him. "I really don't think you want to piss me off right now, Alec. Please just go away." Her arms were beginning to shake from holding her weight in place.

"Just slide off," he suggested.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Cause."

"Cause, what?"

"Cause, I don't have on any panties, you idiot." Mary could feel the sweat beading on her brow; her bottom cheeks were starting to quiver from the exertion of holding on.

"Okay, you straddled a wooden pole with no underwear and I'm the idiot? Did you ever consider you could get splinters in your most delicate place?" He drawled.

"I wasn't thinking that far ahead. I was thinking about how easy it looked in the movies, like Tom Cruise in *Risky Business*, then, I thought about the times I saw people sliding down staircase banisters--"

"Mary, what are you talking about?"

"I don't know," she cried.

"Oh God, now I feel like we're doing a scene out of *I Love Lucy*," he mumbled.

She couldn't see him shaking his head, but she knew he was doing it and probably running a hand through that black thick beautiful hair of his too. Damn his gorgeous hide, he had awful timing.

"Enough, I'm coming up," he yelled.

"No! Please, just leave," she whined.

"Mary, I can't leave you like this. You're upset and you're liable to hurt yourself."

"I wasn't upset until you showed up. If you had been a gentleman you would have backed out of the room and left without me knowing!"

"Oh I see." Alec laughed. "I will never understand the mental mechanics of a woman's mind. "So, it would have been okay if I saw you, as long as I was a liar and never told you I saw you."

Mary could hear his voice coming closer. Her fingers slipped and she slipped down more before she caught the rail once more. She didn't know how much longer she could hold on like

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this, her entire body was screaming in pain from being in that position so long.

“No, damn you,” she sputtered. “Stop twisting my words around.” Mary tried to look over her shoulder once again to see if he was coming and realized her mistake when a sharp muscle spasm shot like fire through the side of her neck and shoulders.

Automatically she released the top railing with a scream, her hands dropping onto the banister to keep from toppling over the side onto the floor below.

She continued to scream while she descended the banister; it felt as if she was moving in slow motion, her heart beating so fast she could barely breathe. Before Mary knew it, she was flat on her back, spread eagled. Her body protested against her stupidity, but she was alive; thanks to all the extra cushion of flesh, she carried on her backside.

Mary didn’t know whether to laugh, because she did slide down the stair banister like she had always wanted to do, or to cry from the humiliation of her shirt being bunched up around her lower hips exposing every reason she had for intimately avoiding, Alec. She had no secrets now, for a few of her scars were splayed open for his inspection. She wanted to be able laugh this off and walk back up those stairs with pride, but she couldn’t stop the tears.

Alec didn’t think he’d ever experienced such fear, as he did the moment, Mary came tearing past him on the stair railing. He could barely breathe from the lump lodged in the back of his throat and if he had a weak heart, he surly would have died at that moment.

Foolish woman! What the hell was she thinking? If Alec wasn’t sure that he had fallen in love with her before, he was now.

“Mary...Mary...don’t you dare try and move until I make sure nothing is broken.” Alec came down on his knees and immediately started running his hands along her arms. Moving to her exposed thighs, he paused.

Staring at the lesions on her inner thighs. There was a patch of skin removed from her thigh indicating a skin graft. He knew from personal experience seeing how he had two similar scars, his acquired from a motorcycle accident. He wondered what had happened to her? As if she sensed him staring she squirmed to get away from him and he held her still. Surly she wasn’t ashamed of something like this.

“Mary--”

“Please, don’t say anything. Just leave me alone.” She tugged her t-shirt down as far as she could, before turning on her side in a fetal position away from him.

“Sweetheart, you can’t just lay here on the floor. Let me help you up to your room,” he offered and received no response except for her sniffing.

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With a deep sigh, Alec left her for a moment returning with two pillows and a thick quilted comforter that he'd pulled off his bed. Lifting her head Alec placed a downy pillow beneath her head and placed another pillow next to hers before he reclined on the floor next to her and wrapped his body behind hers.

Even though she stiffened from his closeness, she didn't tell him to leave. In a matter of minutes, he felt her body go slack against his and smile as he heard her softly snoring. He raised his head, leaned over and kissed her temple. Her ample bottom grazed against his penis seeking his warmth in her sleep. He hardened and stifled a heated moan.

Alec wanted to make love to her so bad his entire body shook with need, but he wanted their first time together to be special. It didn't take a genius to know that if he tried to make love to Mary now in her vulnerable state, he would just prove to her that everything she heard about him was true. That is, if there was a first time between them.

Being a "bad boy" had some advantages, but at this very moment he was beginning to feel as if it was a curse. He never considered the impact his past would have on his future if he were to fall in love; hell, he never thought he'd fall in love, especially this quickly.

He didn't want Mary thinking he was being nice to her to get into her pants. He just didn't know how to convince her that she wasn't just another conquest. She was a fresh change in his daily life; a challenging diversion, but that only allowed for a brief affair. His sweet silly Mary had him thinking long term.

Was he crazy to be thinking of her this way? The negativity they would face as a couple would bring difficulties he didn't need this late in his life. He didn't even know how their parents would react to the possibility of their dating and becoming serious. Just because his mother didn't like Erica, didn't mean she would like his alternative choice. He actually had no idea of their reactions, because in his household the subject never came up.

Alec realized the pressure he was feeling about their future were premature. He had yet to know if Mary was capable of accepting him for who he was, regardless of his reputation. Until he knew if she was going to give them a chance, there was no reason to daydream over what could be.

Snuggling even closer, he tightened his hold, tucking her against him. His nose buried into the coconut-scented depths of her dark brown silky hair. She moaned aloud and buried her bottom into his erection and he shivered with pent-up desire. His breath caught in his throat, and he dared not move as Mary linked her fingers with his resting innocently on her stomach and guided it down between her legs.

She began to pump softly against his fingers. He closed his eyes and grit his teeth. Should

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he wake her up? No, she'd be mortified, if she awakened to find her hand pressing his against her moist pussy. Excitement coiled through him and mingled with a basic need to pleasure her.

His erection pressed uncomfortably against his briefs but it wasn't about his desire for a release, it was about her obvious yearning to be touched. In her unaware state she dared to seek what she didn't have the nerve to ask for when she was awake.

He wondered when was the last time someone held, touched, and caressed her as he was doing now? Had she ever known the comfort of a man's hand? There was so much he wanted to ask her? There was even more he wanted to do to her, but for now this would be enough.

Mary relaxed her hold on his hand and Alec smoothed his hand beneath the hem of her t-shirt. He savored the feeling of flesh touching flesh. She was hot and soft. Her sexy aroma stirred his sense. She was a mixture of charming innocence and untapped sensuality.

Alec matched the frantic pace set by her thrusting hips as his skillful fingers rubbed against her slickness. She whimpered sweetly as his hand guided one of her heavy legs over his thigh to get better access. His covered penis nestled between the cheeks of her naked bottom like a hot dog in a bun and he bit back a moan.

Each dry thrust of his lean hips against her caused the foreskin of his cock to shift up and down; he felt the familiar tension of pending release, building. Pre-cum seeped from the slit of his penis's head mingling in the dampness on the front of his briefs, caused by thrusting against Mary's wetness.

Out of his long list of conquests, he'd never felt a woman that had a pussy this pleasantly plump and juicy. He always had an attraction and a curiosity about being with voluptuous women, but he had never experienced it.

He lifted his head to get a better look at her face. Alec wondered what she was dreaming of? Had she reached for him because of her dreams or was she dreaming erotically because of his touch?

Alec's mind asked the questions he didn't dare ask aloud. *Is that it, my sweet Mary? Are you allowing me to love you in your dreams, yet you keep me at arms length when you're awake? Darling, do you touch yourself at night alone in your bed to ease your desires and keep you virginal?*

Achingly, he longed to know how it would feel to become one with Mary, to make love to a woman that he emotionally felt a connection to. He chanced to dip a finger into her tightness and imagined it was his cock, moving in and easing out before descending once more.

Hearing Mary's throaty moan, her breath coming in short gasps he knew she was close to coming. He held on to her, blessed with long fingers he kept his middle finger inside her while

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manipulated her clitoris with his thumb until she stiffened against him and cried out. A satisfied smile formed on his lips when he reveled in her whimper of his name.

Alec's fingers became drenched as her body shook and shivered in his arms. It was such a sweetly erotic thing to see her the pleasure on her lovely face and even though she appeared to still be sleeping, he found satisfaction in knowing he made her have an orgasm. His erect cock jerked once, then again before he felt a spurt of warmth against his abdomen.

His hold automatically tightened around Mary with a grunt and he rode the waves of his release. Alec mentally let go of all the sexual tension he had been holding since the night he ate Chinese's takeout at Mary's place. The woman had him all twisted in knots and he didn't know what the hell to do about it. He didn't know if there was a time in his life where he felt he was the *pursuer* of a woman.

He placed some space between them as not to dampen the back of her t-shirt from his soiled underwear. Rolling over on to his back he sighed reaching up to wipe the sweat from his brow and caught the smell of Mary on his fingers. He tasted a fingertip...mmm....sweet, musky and wonderful. Amazingly he felt his cock swelling once more.

"Damn," he whispered aloud. He wanted to make love to her all night and sleep with her in his arms. He couldn't do the first but there was nothing stopping him from enjoying the latter. He wanted Mary to know what he was feeling. He wanted to make sure that if she woke up and realized what had just happened between them, he wanted to be here to assure her of his sincerity.

As she softly snored, Alec wearily pushed himself off the floor to go to his bedroom to clean up and change. He went down on his hunches to tuck the comforter beneath her chin and kissed her brow. "I need you, sweet Mary, so whatever is bothering you please confide in me, so that we may move forward together," he murmured against her ear before rising. Crushing his urge to whistle gleefully, Alec made his way to his bedroom with a smile on his face.

By the time, Alec made his way back to the entranceway to return to his place beside Mary on the floor he found her gone. He wouldn't have believed the entire scene had taken place if it hadn't been for the pillows and comforter remaining on the floor.

Alec groaned wondering if indeed she had been awakened while he was touching her and remained silent due to her embarrassment. There was no way to be sure. It could have been when he removed his body heat she woke up, saw she was on the floor alone, and made her way back upstairs to her own bed.

He placed his foot on the first step prepared to go to her and halted, closing his eyes with a deep sigh. He couldn't go to her. What would he say? I masturbated you while I thought you

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were sleep. You appeared to enjoy it, so lets do it again now that you're awake?

"Pffft! Yeah that's a romantic thing to do." His hand gripped the stair rail causing a silly grin to come to his face. He shook his head in disbelief. "Crazy woman actually slid down this railing, hell I didn't even do something so stupid when I was a kid. Didn't she realize people didn't do this shit for real? Or at least not from one this high up."

Alec released a curse. "Damned woman. She's got me up at five in the morning, talking to my freakin' self." He turned, picked up the pillows and comforter and slowly made his way back to his own empty bed, hoping Mary would change her mind and come back; maybe she went to clean up too and had planned to come back.

Hopeful, he turned, stood looking at the stairs and waited, listening for sound that indicated she was coming back. After a few minutes, he realized it was wishful thinking on his part. Mary had probably awakened all alone on the floor, came to her senses, or worse thought he had abandoned her to remain sprawled on the floor alone for the rest of the night.

He threw the pillows on the bed and climbed between the downy cool sheets. Alec angrily punched the pillows a couple of times before settling in. He turned on his side, caught the trace of Mary's scent on the pillow, and took a long deep breath. Reaching down to touch himself, he mentally relived the moments he held her in his arms.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

After waking up from a fitful sleep, Mary took an extra long soak in the tub and took even longer to get dress. She changed clothing at least four times before settling on a spiced colored crochet baby doll blouse over jeans and brown suede flat-heeled ankle boots.

She took another hour to apply light makeup and twist her hair atop of her head with two chopsticks. Nothing seemed to be working in making her feel better. How was she supposed to face a man that she worked for and had a crush on, the morning after she humiliated herself in more ways than one?

Should she go downstairs pretending like nothing had happened, well, she couldn't pretend that she didn't nearly kill herself on the stairs, nor could she ignore the fact that she had cried in front of him. Even if she wanted to play oblivious, it didn't mean that he would go along with the farce.

Mary's face flushed a bright red. She could feel the sensation of shame all the way up to the burning of her ears, as the memory of her wanton behavior haunted her. Even though she was embarrassed by her behavior, a familiar throbbing occurred between her legs. Her body ached for more. She somehow felt incomplete.

When she awakened to see her hand pressing against Alec's hand between her thighs, while she humped against his fingers, she couldn't let him know she was aware of what was happening to her. Lying there in the warmth of Alec's arms pretending to be asleep, as his fingers stroke and eased her was the most wonderful sensation she'd ever felt. Touching herself had never brought her such an intense feeling.

Even now the sound of Alec's heavy breathing in her ear, the way he grunted, held his breath, then groaned his release made her wet all over again. She didn't think she heard anything as gloriously sexy as the deep throaty sounds of Alec when he came. Mary also remembered him kissing her forehead and whispering he "needed her". Knowing he needed her made her feel soft and vulnerable. She'd never thought she would have a man say such a thing to her.

Mary groaned and dropped down on the side of the bed, her wide shoulders drooping. What was she going to do? She was falling in love with Alec. She wanted him to need her. Not just

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because he needed an assistant, not because he was very sexual and needed a woman to relieve his boredom. She wanted him to want a serious relationship with *her*, something that would lead to marriage and children.

No. Mary shook her head. Men like Alec didn't marry women like her. The moment she gave in to him and they became lovers, he would probably drop her. She would become another one of the many women he managed to bed, a virgin no less.

If her scars didn't scare him away from touching her as he did, then she would bet top dollars that his male ego to conquer every female he met kept his hand between her legs. However, he couldn't bear to stay by her side afterwards.

Mary eyes burned with tears she didn't have left to shed, after crying the rest of the night away until she fell into an exhausted sleep. The one thing Mary knew is she had to make it through the week because she had promised him, but there was no way she could continue to work with him once they got back home.

The awkwardness alone would be unbearable. Now that her heart was involved she couldn't work at Mercer Corp at all. Everyday she would know he was there, somewhere, telling someone else he needed her. For all she knew he hadn't really called Erica and broken off the engagement.

Still, if Alec was willing, she suppose if she was going to lose her virginity, choosing a man with his lengthy experience would be a good place to start. If she willingly went to his bed, she would eventually find out if he was sincere in his pursuit or if he just wanted sex.

Hell, the physical chemistry between them was no joke; it was erotic and powerful. A force that couldn't be denied and especially after this morning feeling his hands on her. Slowly, her hand stole between her legs, imagining Alec's unforgettable touch.

Quickly she removed her hand and released a long string of curses. She wanted him and now that he had spoiled her she didn't think she would every feel satisfied by touching herself, again!

"So why not let you be my first? I can do this, I know I can."

With her mind made up, Mary checked her reflection in the mirror one last time. She removed her glasses and left them on the dresser before she opened the door and headed towards the stairs. To her surprise, Alec was sitting at the bottom of the stairs. He turned on the step to look up at her. Had he actually been waiting? For how long, she wondered.

"It's about time you came out of that bedroom. I was about to break down the fuckin' door and let myself in," Alec said tersely. "Are you okay? You aren't sore today are you?"

Mary brow lifted and she could feel the heat spreading over her face. "Sore? Should I be?"

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“Yes, after turning my staircase into some freakin’ amusement ride,” he voice grew louder. “You scared me half to death. Mary, you must promise me you will never do anything so foolish again.”

“Oh, that’s what you were talking about.” She released a sigh of relief. “Don’t worry, my days of riding staircases are behind me.”

“That’s good to hear. Now, I was talking about the staircase, what else would I be talking about?” He asked, but to her it sounded as if he was fishing.

Mary chanced another glance at him. Why was he grinning up at her like that? Damn, she thought he was so fine, dressed in black form fitting jeans and a charcoal colored turtle neck sweater. If she wasn’t sure about asking him to relieve her of her virginity before she left the bedroom she was now.

The only way to get over Alec Mercer was to get under Alec Mercer with thighs spread wide, she decided. Yep, she would let him ride her until she had exorcised this sexual demon he turned loose inside her.

“Why are you staring at me that way?” His deep voice cut through her thoughts.

How should she handle this? Should she allow him to make all the moves and just let it happen? No, that wasn’t any good. If she handled it that way it would give him the upper hand and that would mean when he broke it off she would get hurt. If she maintained control of when they did it, then she could walk away without regrets.

Mary decided the only way was to tell him what she wanted and to let him know she didn’t want a relationship, or anything else.

“Mary?”

“Huh?”

“I asked why are you staring at me that way?” Alec repeated.

“Uh, what way?”

“Like you want to say something and you’re not sure if you should,” he supplied.

Mary thought for a moment and took a deep breath, slowly descending the stairs as he came to his feet. “Not something I want to say, but there is something I want to ask of you.”

“Stop right there.” He shouted and her mouth clamped shut pensively as she continued descending the stairs.

“No, I didn’t mean stop talking, I mean stop on that step,” His deep voice softened. “Before you ask, can you do something for me first?”

“What?” Her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“You’ll see,” he answered. “Now come down two more steps...that’s it...stop!” He came

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up one step.

“Alec, what are you doing? I really need to speak with you.”

“Afterwards.”

“After what?”

He came up two more steps until he was standing in front of her. With the differences in their height, it put them nose-to-nose. He placed his hands on her hips a beaming smile on his face, as if he had accomplished some great feat. “Perfect. Now, I can give you a proper good morning.”

Her eyes followed his tongue as he moistened his lips and she did the same because it was a sure sign a kiss was comin’ and boy, she was ready for it. If Alec hadn’t initiated the kiss, she would have...eventually...maybe.

“Good morning, my sweet Mary.”

He took her face in his hands and tilted her face to the right as he went to the left. Painfully, slowly, he teased her mouth with his relaxed lips sliding back and forth until he seemed satisfied he found the perfect fit of his mouth against hers.

Even though she could feel his body’s response to her nearness was as ardent as her own, he acted as if he had all the time in the world to do nothing, but stand there and establish the beginnings of the perfect kiss.

Mary could barely breathe from the anticipation of what was to come. She was tense and giddy at the same time. She felt as if she was about to soil her panties on his kisses, that was, if he would get on with it. What was he waiting for? Did he want her to kiss him, she moved to capture his lips and he pulled back with a grin. His thumbs caressed her cheeks, like whispering feathers.

Take me already! Her mind screamed. She heard a whimper emanate from her throat she bit down on her bottom lip in surprise. *Where did that come from?*

The moment she released her bottom lip and blew out a long sigh, Alec was there to steal it from her as he took advantage of her parted mouth. Mary never knew a kiss could be so overwhelmingly tender and adoring. A single tear slowly glided down her cheek and he wiped it away with his thumb.

“It’s okay,” he murmured against her mouth, nuzzling her nose with his nose. “You’re so beautiful.”

She wanted to call him a liar, and decided against it. Was it possible under the kindness of his kisses, her face flushed with arousal, she was beautiful? The way he was looking at her made her feel beautiful.

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Was the earth shaking? Her body seemed to be vibrating and humming against his, the sexual energy was so strong it felt almost spiritual. Being in Alec's arms was like Feng Shui of lips touching lips, body touching body, spirit touching spirit. The feel of Alec's chest against her breast, caused her to feel his heart beating.

"Kiss me again," she demanded.

Perfection. Their mouths kissed and his tongue touched, caressed, and mated with hers. Both of them releasing a sigh of surrender causing the air between them to blow hotly out of their noses, against the other's face as the kiss deepened.

Mary leaned into his possessive hold. She tightened and bunched up his sweater in her fist to remain upright as she felt her knees buckle. Alec's hold on her tightened arching her to the side resting her back on his arms, he dipped and French kissed her until she was completely pliant against him. She had become oblivious to the fact they were still standing on the stairs.

Mary completely trusted Alec to keep her from falling. She was falling head over hills in love and more than ever desired him to be her first lover. Another tear escaped between her tightly closed lids. She didn't want to cry she was content with her decision, she was happy to be spending this time with Alec, no matter when or how it ended.

He was the first to break the kiss. He caught her descending tears with the soft touch of his lips to each cheek in turn.

"Look at me Mary," he ordered. Without hesitation she opened her eyes. "Good morning."

Mary slowly grinned. "Good morning, Alec."

His hands reached down, cupped both cheeks of her jean-clad buttocks, and held on. Her brow lifted in question.

"It feels good to feel these in my hands, I have some very fond memories of being nestled between them, earlier this morning." He winked and asked, "Why did you leave me? I wanted to spend the rest of the morning holding you."

"You did?" Her eyes widened in surprise. "Uh, I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know after I thought about it, because I couldn't sleep for thinking about it." He quirked a dark eyebrow at her and continued, "I realized you hadn't been asleep, well you were when you reached and pushed my hands between your legs, but afterwards you felt everything I did to you."

"Please," Mary tried to pull away but he wasn't having it. She was mortified. Did he have to be so blunt about it and give a play-by-play replay?

"I wasn't trying to fool you. I was so embarrassed after I notice my hands were pressing your hand between my legs. I couldn't bare it if you laughed at me especially after I did slapstick

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comedy on this staircase,” Mary explained.

“Crazy woman, do you think you have enough to strength to keep my hand there if I didn’t want it to be there? I wanted what you wanted, except I need more,” Alec said. “If I hadn’t thought I would embarrass you and risk you stopping me from touching you, I would have begged you to touch me.”

“You would have?”

He smiled a closed lip smile, softening the hard lines of his masculine features. “Of course I would sweetheart, my entire body ached for your touch...to be inside you.”

She shrugged, “If I hadn’t ran like a scared rabbit to my bedroom the minute you left my side, I would have known this. You must find my lack of experience, childish and boring.”

“Are you kidding me?” He chuckled. “You are anything but boring Ms. Mary Christmas, and your lack of experience excites the hell out of me.”

“Really?”

“Why would I lie about such a thing? Besides, I have enough experience for the both of us.” He playfully wiggled his eyebrows at her in emphasis.

Mary’s face gave him an impish smile and leaned forward to kiss him once more. He made her feel so much better. Hopeful.

“So, you said you have been thinking about what happened and I hope you have also been thinking about giving us a shot, or do you mean you been thinking about it and now you have regrets about what happened between us?”

Mary answered his question with a question. “Besides my not touching you, do you have any other regrets?”

He stole her breath away with a devastating grin. “I would have thought that kiss put all your doubts to rest.”

“Just a little,” she giggled. “It felt...no, the way you’re gripping my ass, it feels as if you want to explore things a bit more. Do you think you are going to be letting go of me anytime soon.”

“You know me very well, seeing how you haven’t known me long.” Alec kissed her once more and she opened her mouth to accept his kiss.

“I beg your pardon, I’m a big fan of your work, so I’ve been watching you closely for the past two years and I feel as if I know you.”

“Then you have me at a disadvantage, I feel as if I can’t find out enough about you. I want to know everything. Your favorite colors, foods, songs, authors and movies--”

Mary placed her hand over his lips to stop him. “Okay, I get it. There is no rush is it? We

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have this week to spend getting to know one another.”

“You’re still sticking to the one week plan, huh?” Alec mumbled.

When he released his hold on her bottom and pulled away to walk down stairs with her trailing on his heels, she almost felt a chill from the sudden lack of contact with his body; she actually found herself craving his nearness.

She didn’t know if it was because Alec sensed her needs or he felt the same way she did, he laced his hand with hers, their palms fulfilling the need their lips couldn’t while strolling towards the kitchen.

Mary released a loud gasp of surprise as her back made contact with the wall and before she could protest Alec was pressing his body into hers. Passionately, possessively, tenderly, he kissed her.

She remained breathlessly stunned by his actions, not to mention her entire body was itching for more. She didn’t think she’d been touched, teased, and man handled so much in her entire life, as she had since being in Alec’s company. She liked it. It was wonderful having a man just hands length away at most times, to touch and to be touched anytime the urge seized you. God help her, how was she going to walk away from him after the week was over?

Panting heavily, Alec pressed his forehead to hers. “Since you’re only giving me a week, I’m going to make the best of every minute of it, so you might as well get use to my touching you quickly.”

Releasing her and clasping her hand once more they finally made it to the kitchen.

To both their surprise they found George already in the kitchen working on breakfast. He was a heavyset fellow with snow-white hair, mustache and beard. His cheeks looked as if he suffered from Rosacea, then again, it could be from the heat of the griddle as he flipped a row of pancakes.

Mary tried to tug her hand from Alec’s, but he held on refusing to let her go, so she stood by his side and smiled at George who turned his twinkling blue eyes on them.

“Good morning kids,” his white shaggy eyebrows wiggled mischievously as he spoke and Mary blushed wondering if he had somehow caught some of the action that had transpired between her and Alec on the steps or in the hallway. He could get a good view of the hall from where he stood at the oven. “I bet you two are starving this morning, go ahead and have a seat and I will fetch things to the table.”

“It smells delicious,” Mary said as she took a seat in the chair Alec held out for her.

“Yes, it does.” Alec agreed with hands resting on her shoulders, he leaned over and whispered against her ear. “But, you smell better and I guarantee you taste sweeter than mom’s

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homemade molasses.”

Mary eyes grew wide and heat went beyond her full face, it spread all over her body like wildfire. She turned a warning glare on him. He just took a seat across from her grinning like the spoiled kid that kept going in the cookie jar even after he’d been caught.

He wink at her and she thought, *damn him, for being so handsome and adorable.*

“How are the roads this morning, are they still passable?” Mary asked, noting out of the corner of her eyes how Alec stiffened and the boyish grin faded from his face. Did he think she was asking because she still wanted to leave?

“Well, it’s heating up a bit Miss, so much of the ice that was on the roads is melting, it should be okay.” George supplied, placing a plate of pancakes and bacon both crisp and limp before them. He moved to the counter and reached for soft scrambled eggs and steaming hot biscuits. Bustling away for a moment he returned with a bowl of white pepper gravy and hash brown potatoes with chopped onions.

Mary’s mouth dropped wide. “Wow, are you feeding an army?” She grinned, her stomach growling with growing hunger from the smells alone.

“I wasn’t sure what you liked, and just in case you didn’t care for pancakes, like Al here, I figured you could enjoy one thing or the other.”

She saw Alec grin, but it didn’t appear to reach his eyes. Suddenly, he seemed immersed in his own thoughts.

Mary didn’t miss the long look George gave Alec before smiling and saying, “Is there a reason you’d be askin’ about the roads, Miss? Is there somewhere you would like to be going?”

“Call me, Mary, please, and yes, I was hoping Alec would drive me down to the stables to see the horses and sleigh he told me about.”

Was that relief she saw on his face? Was he truly worried that she wanted to go home after what had happened between them. *No, Mr. Mercer, I have big plans for us.*

“Great! I would love to show you and even if the road aren’t drivable we can snowmobile down there.” Alec piped up and offered her a couple of pancakes.

“Just one pancake is fine,” Mary said heaping a spoon full of eggs on her plate. He nodded as she offered him a serving. “I was wondering if you were the one to guide the sleigh?” she asked Alec.

“No, actually there is an orphanage about fifteen miles down the road. George dresses up as Santa--”

Mary turned to the older man who was leaning against the cabinet drying his hands on a dishtowel. “I knew you looked familiar,” she laughed.

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“Yep, that's me, good old Santa Clause. Now, Al, tell her what you are, son.”

Alec turned red as a beet and became very studious in his search for the soft pieces of bacon. “I'm sure Mary, don't care to hear about this George, shouldn't you be getting back to the lodge. The fellas will be in for lunch before you know it.”

“Boy, I've been doing this routine since back when you were in diapers so I don't need you reminding me of what needs to be done and when. Now tell the pretty lady the truth about you being one of Santa's little helpers.” George chuckled and walked over to remove his coat off the hook by the kitchen door.

“Alec, you're...you're an elf!” Mary said gleefully.

“No, I'm a *union-worker* and we are employees of Santa. Except I'm really thinking about going on strike this year.”

Mary laughed and so did he. She liked the sound of his laughter along with the way his beautiful green eyes sparkled beneath his foolishly long lashes. She felt a sudden urge to reenact another movie scene and swipe everything off the table on to the floor except the syrup, that she would pour all over his body.

She cleared her throat and looked down at the food on her plate.

“Why are you blushing?” Alec asked.

“Huh? Black women don't blush, haven't you heard?” She fluttered her lashes at him.

“Well you do, all the time,” he laughed. “Have I told you yet today that you have the most beautiful eyes?”

Affectionately, she reached out and touched his freshly shaven face with the back of her hand.

Alec smiled warmly at her.

“I didn't know you dressed up in costume and took gifts to the local orphanage.”

“There is much we have to learn about one another, Mary.” He covered and held her hand to his face. “I believe so far all you've heard is the bad and gossip.”

“True,” she admitted. “Can I ask why you allow the media to know only the nonchalant rich playboy side of you?”

“I suppose being a playboy is what the public expects from most wealthy single bachelors. As long as my family and friends know who I really am, I don't feel the need to counteract the tabloids.” Alec shrugged his broad shoulders, allowing Mary to pull away her hand.

She watched him. With bent head he looked down at his plate forking his leftover eggs as he continued to speak, “Besides, if I made what I do public, then who is it benefiting me or the children. No, I won't have the orphanage bombarded with the media, just to paint myself in a

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better light.”

Mary nodded, her eyes not missing the fact George had quietly slipped out of the kitchen, leaving them alone. There was something very cozy about them sitting here like this in the kitchen, talking. It made her imagine doing this for the rest of her life. Curiously she wondered how Alec would look twenty years from now. Would his dark hair be silver? Would the crinkles of laughter beside his eyes deepen?

She pushed her plate aside and nursed the cup of coffee in her hands after Alec gave her a refill from the coffee pot and warmer sitting on the table. “I want you to know that I’m sorry. I believe I was one of those people that thought the worse about you. I think it was because it was easier.”

“Easier? Why?”

“Well, when a girl like me fantasizes about men they see in the media, on television, or in the movies, they dream like other women of the possibilities that a guy like you would want her. Then, we pass a mirror and we see the beautiful stick figured women you’re with and reality crashes in causing us to down a pizza and a pint of the most fattening ice cream we can find--” Mary’s voice faded into a nervous giggle. Alec wasn’t laughing.

“Mary, do you not like the way you look?”

Mary looked away from his searching eyes. “I don’t know. I use to think I looked okay, of course, not a size six okay, but a size eighteen okay.”

“If that is true, why do you put yourself down?”

She shrugged her round shoulders. “I suppose I do it before anyone else can. It doesn’t hurt as much when I say it.”

“Then I don’t want to hear you do it anymore, because it hurts me when you do it. I think you are beautiful as you are, with a heart to match. Unless you’re with a very shallow man, he has to be blind to not notice that you are a special woman.”

Before she could protest he added, “I know my actions in the past have spoke differently, but those days are over. I’m coming out of the closet,” Alec winked and chuckled. “You want to call a press conference so I can shout it to the world?”

Laughing she asked, “Shout what to the world?”

“That I’m a fat chaser, that I love plump women. That I am the artist, Rubenesque, and I secretly covet what I wasn’t brave enough to express in my real world, until now,” Alec confessed with a wide grin.

“Stop joking,” Mary playfully hit at hand.

Alec’s face grew serious. “Mary, I mean it.” Mary’s grin faded as she listened in stunned

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disbelief. "I will pick up the phone right now and have my agent schedule a press conference to reveal my reclusive artist identity."

"Alec," Mary breathed. "Why? Why would you do such a thing?"

"I would do it in a minute if it would mean that you will never think you weren't good enough for men like me. My fear is, that because of what you already know about me you won't believe a damn thing that I say to you. Including the fact that I like you the way that you are and seeing those wonderful big thighs in jeans, nearly drives me out of my freakin' mind."

Mary didn't know what to say.

Alec took a swig of coffee and muttered, "Was it the guard at the office you dated that led you to believe you weren't beautiful the way you are? If it was I'll fire him once we return."

Her eyes grew wide with disbelief. How did Alec know she had gone out with one of the guards at work? It was only for about a month or two, with nothing coming of it. Until she found out he was liar and had a bet that he could get her into his bed. A horrified thought came Mary's mind. *Had everyone been talking about that in the office behind her back?*

He placed his half consumed cup of coffee on the table before him. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I guess everyone got a big laugh at my expense," she frowned. "Tell me, Alec, did you place a bet for or against me losing my virginity in Bill's bed? Is that why you were surprised I was still a virgin because you believed the lies he spread?"

He held up a hand. "Shield the claws kitten, and you're wrong. I didn't know anything about a bet, I just overheard a few of the guards in the parking garage as I was leaving discussing the sweet lady that made gifts for everyone, was dating one of their own." Alec's eyes narrowed. "Are you telling me that son-of-a-bitch asked you out for some childish prank?"

Mary calmed down at his angry tone. She reached out and placed her hand over his resting on the table. "It's over and I survived it. Nothing happened between us and the fellows that are my friends in the guard-shack let me know what was going on. He apologized and it's done," Mary explained. "No harm done."

"That's not true. Now you're hesitant about allowing yourself to open up to me or any other man that is interested in you." Alec intertwined his fingers with hers. "At least I understand better why you would be wary about the dating thing."

"I'm more curious at this moment in why you were you sneaking around the guard desk long enough to hear that conversation?"

"Hey!" Alec balked. "I don't have to sneak around my own office building."

"I know those guys, they never would have been indulging in office chit-chat if they had

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seen you. Everyone walks on eggshells when the boss is around,” Mary pointed out.

Alec rolled a discarded toothpick between his fingers with his free hand a chagrined smile on his lips. “Okay, I was curious about you and I kind of asked if they had heard if you were seeing anyone.”

“You’re lying!” Mary laughed out cutting her eyes at him. “The guys would have told me something like that.”

“Not if they wanted to keep their jobs,” Alec said sternly. “Since we are being honest here, I might as well come clean. My curiosity actually began after Halloween of last year.”

“Oh,” was all she said. She remembered that Halloween well.

“Exactly,” he chuckled. “You were the only one that came to work dressed up for Halloween, our own little Raggedy Ann.”

Mary moaned and laid her head on the table unable to look at him. That was one of the top five humiliating incidents of her life. Of course, with last night’s escapades on the steps it moved down to the number three spot.

Number one had to be her heel breaking off her boot when she was about to take a step down into the school cafeteria. The heel bounced down the steps, as if in slow motion, and the other students in the entire lunchroom became quiet only bursting out in mutual laughter once the runaway heel bounced off the bottom step onto the floor.

Mary moaned again. No, that number one has to go to the time she came out of the girl’s bathroom at the restaurant on prom night with the tail of her dress tucked in her pantyhose and she wasn’t wearing any underwear. Yep, that was still the number one ditzzy moment of her life.

“I looked awful, go ahead and say it,” Mary wailed covering her face with both hands.

“No,” Alec chuckled. “Sweetheart, I thought you looked adorable, there was something about those thighs again in those black and white striped tights, I’m getting heated just thinking about it.” He laughed

“If you’re heated, it’s because of the hot coffee,” Mary scoffed.

“Nonsense, it was from that day on you had my respect. I thought you were very brave and self-confident to walk out of the house in such a getup,” Alec assured her. “Anyone else would have went home at lunch and changed clothing after realizing no one else dressed up; but not you. You toughened the entire day and continued handing out wrapped baked brownies—which were delicious by the way—from that big basket you carried. You were so cute skipping from one work station to another.” He shook his head with a chuckle.

“On my behalf let me say, I thought I could loosen up the office a bit and I campaigned hard to get my coworkers to participate. Several said they were thinking about it. I think I was more

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disappointed then surprised that no one but me dressed up for Halloween.” Mary gave him a dimple smile and added, “Well at least you dressed up that day.”

A slight frown puckered Alec’s brow. “I didn’t dress up for Halloween last year.”

“Yeah, you did,” she rolled her eyes and sighed. “You wore these hideous colorful green and blue plaid pants with this bright yellow pull over shirt with a plaid matching plaid collar and even had a hat to match. It was okay, but you would have made a better clown if you had worn some big shoes and put some clown makeup on,” Mary reasoned. “Maybe, one of those big red noses, a orange curly afro.

To her surprise Alec threw back his head and released a loud stream of laughter. She grinned thinking he was the most beautiful man she’d ever seen this close up. She really loved his near flawless white smile.

“Mary, you’re killing me,” Alec wiped away the tears of laughter from his eyes with the back of his hands. “That wasn’t a costume. I had to rush to the office straight from the golf course and I didn’t have time to change.”

Her face flushed with color. “Oops. What were you doing on that golf course? Hitting the ball or trying to scare it into the hole?”

Alec laughed. “Oh my God woman, you’re priceless. I don’t remember the last time I’ve laughed so much.” He held up the palm of his hand. “What I do remember is anticipating the moment you’d get around to delivering one of your brownies to me. I even left my office door open awaiting the moment you’d skip so I could watch your *hooters* bounce--”

“Alec!” Mary’s mouth dropped wide before her face crumpled in laughter.

“Hey, we are being honest and I’m just telling you what I was thinking at that time.” His eyes dropped below her chin and grinned when she crossed her arms over her breasts.

“Here it is over a year later and it seems to me you’re still thinking the same thing,” Mary chastised. “Eyes are up here, *Mister*.”

Alec cleared his throat. She was glad to see he followed instructions well as his green eyes bore into hers. “Anyway, I don’t remember the last time I felt so disappointed. When my assistant came in and placed the brownie on my desk, I realized you’d already stopped by.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know. It never dawned on me to be bold enough to walk into the big boss’s inner sanctum and disturb you by handing you a brownie.”

“I didn’t think it was silly at all, I think it was very sweet and it still is, that you try every year to get others to participate. I promise next Halloween I will dawn on the green tights and elf hat, so you won’t be celebrating alone.”

Mary could only feel delight in the fact that he spoke of them still working together come

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next fall.

"I can't wait to see you all dressed up," she admitted aloud. "Too bad I got to go home at the end of the week or I would get to see you and George dressed up for Christmas."

"Oh, you must stay now, Mary. There is no way I'm missing out on taking someone with me who loves Holidays as much as you do. Besides, the kids will get a kick out hearing that your name is Mary Christmas." He touched the tip of her nose. "I like it that you aren't wearing your glasses, I love your eyes."

Mary found it an endearing thing to say and her heart thumped rapidly in her chest. She remembered his touch to another part of her body and raw sexual warmth spread through her as she stumbled for words to clear her mind from such thoughts. "If...if I knew about the orphanage I would have gladly brought my, *Mrs. Santa*, outfit, but I didn't so I suppose it will be best for me to go home."

"No problem, we can throw something together for you," Alec countered, obviously ignoring her comment about going home.

Mary shook her head and said, "I don't think so. I don't sew well."

"You don't have to, my mother used to make my clothes as a kid, it was cheaper then buying them. She can have you ready to go in no time."

"Alec, what about my parents? Remember, my father is not feeling well, that is the main reason I was returning."

"If your father isn't up to making the ride, I will make sure that your parents arrive by helicopter along with my parents, that is if the weather is passable. If it's not then we all will be stuck where we're at."

"No matter what I say you are going to have an answer, aren't you?"

"Say you'll spend Christmas and New years with me, Mary. I really would love for you to meet the rest of my family."

Mary knew better than to argue with him. At the office she had witnessed Alec get his way, with charm and stubbornness. He could be tenacious when he wanted something, and at the moment he was making it clear that she was the something he was wanting. The thing that bothered Mary was, for how long? Would it be days, months, or years, before he grew tired of her?

She shrugged off the familiar doubts that threaten to kill her current state of happiness. She would relax and enjoyed whatever time they had together. No matter what happened, she didn't think she'd ever felt happier.

Mary stared at Alec in awe as he spouted off every holiday costume she'd worn to work in

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the past.

"I always looked forward to each holiday at the office where you would do something to make it more festive. Like, the heart apron on Valentine's Day. You would have a basket of heart-shaped "Be Mine" cookies. On St. Patrick's Day you wear the green dress and pantyhose and give out green shamrock shaped *Rice Krispie's* bars. I wonder can we find those stockings you wear at Christmas, the ones that are red and white stripes. All I can think about when I see you in them is how your legs look like big candy canes and I get this crazy urge to lick my way up."

As usual Mary couldn't refrain from the heat spreading across her face and ears, but it made her feel good somehow, knowing he noticed her escapades in his office and not once had he ever refrained her from dressing up and handing out goodies. Now she knew why, the cad had been eyeing her bodily wares.

"You really are a leg man aren't you?" She asked quirked a dark eyebrow at him.

"I am now," he admitted and brought her hand up to his mouth and kissed her palm.

"If I knew you were into voluptuous women, I wouldn't have missed all those golden opportunities to come to you personally. So I settled with getting little glimpses of you through your open office door," she confessed.

From the look on his face, she saw it was his turn to be surprised. "Mary, why didn't you take a chance on me? Have I've been such a Scrooge, that you didn't even consider chancing it just once?"

"Yes, of course I considered it, dreamed about it, but after everything, I heard and read about you. I..." she paused.

"What?"

"I wasn't sure if I wanted to meet you. I was scared that you were everything they said about you and I didn't want to be disappointed, if it were true," she said honestly. "I knew I liked looking at you. I found your appearance as handsome and refined as some of the heroes I read about in books. I'd never dreamt that you could be interested in me." Mary held up her hand.

"Before you protest, I'm not saying it because of my weight." She became increasingly uneasy under his thoughtful scrutiny. "I was thinking more that you wouldn't be interested once you found out about my illness?"

"Illness?" Alec took both of her hands in his and held them. "Is it serious?"

She saw the worry lines crinkled across his brow and around his mouth. He was truly concerned. It touched her heart and gave her the strength to say what needed to be said, before she allowed herself to fall any deeper in love with him. How could she expect to become his

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lover without him knowing the truth about her? He saw some of her scars last night, and seemed to be handling it well.

“First, let me tell you it’s not contagious or life threatening unless I were to develop an infection that is not responsive to antibiotics. At this time there is no known cure, and as far as I can tell there isn’t enough government or public funding to find one.”

“Mary, please, you’re frightening me. What the hell is wrong with you? Is it some strange form of cancer or what? Just say it baby.”

“I’m sorry this is the only way I know how to explain it. I don’t talk about this to many people, just my family and others in my support group.” Mary pulled in a deep breath and released it slowly. “Alec, I have what is known as *Hidradenitis Suppurativa*. The doctor first diagnosed me when I was seventeen. I thought it was cancer at first because it started with a single knot under my left arm. I was so scared I kept it to myself until it got to the point that it was so painful, I could no longer ignore what it was doing to my body.”

“Mary,” his voice softened as he squeezed her hand in his.

“I figured if I worked really hard to get healthy that it would just disappear. I started exercising regularly, lost weight, and doing a lot of praying. One day it disappeared as quickly as it seemed to appear and I thought all was well.”

“So, it can be maintained? This illness?”

“Hidradenitis has a pattern of coming and going. It’s the nature of this illness. I cannot have any symptoms for months...years even, and then without warning, you get a flare-up that makes even the most mundane daily activities hell.”

She looked down at his pale hands intertwined with hers. He had big, veined hands with clean squared tipped nails. Something about their masculine beauty exuded a comforting, yet underlying strength.

Mary thought of a time when she was frightened by the strangeness of her own body. She would have sold her soul to have someone to hold her and soothe away her fears with such hands. Instead she suffered in silence...alone.

As if sensing her need to be touched. Alec reached out and cupped her chin, tilting her face up to look at him. “Tell me what you’re thinking?”

“During spring break of the year I was to graduate I spent the day at the lake. Once I got home I took a shower and when I dried off with a towel there was blood on it,” she swallowed back the lump in her throat.

“Oh, Mary, sweetheart I can’t imagine the fear you must have felt at such a young,” Alec soothed. His hand moved from her chin to caress a strand of hair behind her ear.

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"I was terrified but I was more fearful of going to the doctors and them telling me I was dying. The knot under my arm, hurt really bad, and I thought it was okay since it wasn't hurting anymore. It had broken through the skin and it appeared as if my flesh was coming out of the opening."

"My God, Mary, I'm so sorry you had to go through this and you were practically a kid. Please, tell me everything. I want to know all that I can. We can find the best doctors to see if there is something that can be done. Money? Hell, they need research money? I can do that much."

The sweet surge of affection she felt coming from him gave her hope and the strength to continue.

"Oh Alec," she croaked. Tears fell down her face. "You're right. I was terrified. Finally, I was scared enough to finally go to my parents. They took me to doctor after doctor until finally we found a doctor that knew what was wrong with me."

"Give me the basics of what this *Hidra...Hidra*-- shit, help me here," he chuckled.

She could hear the nervousness in his voice. The same sound most people get when they hear about this illness because they never heard of it before. If you say "Cancer" or "Aids", there would be no need for explanations; but, with this, trying to explain the unexplainable was hard. Surviving how people treated you afterwards was even worse.

"We call it HS, because it's easier." She managed a reassuring smile. "Basically, it's a skin disorder, but that is debatable because some doctors believe it's a sweat gland problem. Yet, obviously since there is no cure I'm not sure they know for sure what it is."

"I take it from the scarring I saw on your inner thighs, it can happen in more places than under your arms. Where did they do the skin grafting?" Alec asked.

Mary's eyes grew wide, "You could tell I had a skin graft? Everyone else thought I had a burn scar on my leg."

"I know from experience," he explained. "I was in a motorcycle accident some years back and it took the skin off parts of my leg."

"You mean you're not perfect?" She teased.

"Show me a person who is and I'll show you a liar." Alec grinned. "There is no such thing as perfection, only illusions of perfection."

She was amazed at how easy it was to talk to him about her most intimate secret. Why hadn't he run for the hills yet? Even if he didn't think anyone was perfect, surely he didn't want a woman as scarred as she was. Was he just being a gentleman? Or did it really not matter to

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him?

Mary realized he asked her once again was the grafting under her arms? “For now it’s just one arm. Under my right arm because I had waited so long to get it taken care of.”

Alec nodded and asked, “What else do I need to know about your illness?”

“Well,” Mary heaved a sigh. “I can develop boil-like lesions on the inner thighs, beneath my breast, around my nipples, in the groin area, scalp, neck, vagina, anus. Almost any place that there is hair growing or sweat glands.”

“I see.” He looked away, his brow puckered in deep thought. “Is that it?”

“You need more?” She asked in surprise. “I thought you’d be disgusted from all that you’ve heard so far.”

He shook his head and leaned back in his chair. “I suppose you’re going to always think the worse of me, aren’t you?”

She realized with a wry smile she had unknowingly insulted him again. “I’m sorry. How about I print up some information for you that can answer any questions you may have. I’m not use to speaking about it to anyone that isn’t in the medical field.”

“I understand and I would like that.” He leaned towards her once more. Covering her hand with his, he squeezed. “Mary, I hope you know I’m sincere in my intentions and I want you to know you can depend on me to be here for you. Even if you only want to keep me as a friend, I want you to come to me if you need me to help you get through the pain or cleans locations you can’t reach.”

“Alec,” she murmured in a broken whisper.

Mary could see he was genuine in his offer and she felt overwhelmed by his kindness towards her, yet she silently damned him for giving her hope and desires.

Needing to put as much space as possible between them Mary slid back her chair and stood. Disconcerted, she crossed arms and pointedly looked away. All of her loneliness and confusion fused together in one surge of devouring longing. She wanted to open her heart up to him and allow him to make everything better.

Then again, it was easy for him to be kind when they were alone. What about when they were around his family, friends, and business associates? Would he still feel inclined to be there for her when the cameras were snapping photos for some of the top magazines?

No, she couldn’t let herself get carried away by his current thoughtfulness. Alec Mercer made his living out of knowing how to say the right thing at the right time. Advertising was his life, and he was very good at making a hard sell. Mary was definitely ready to buy what he was selling.

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"I think I'll go and get started on some work..." her voice cracked and her temples throbbed.

Before Mary could exit the kitchen, she felt Alec's strong arms wrap around her entire body from behind. He swooped her against his hard form. "Don't Mary...don't shut me out. You don't have to keep going through your illness in silence and alone."

"Alec, you don't know what you're saying," she cried.

"I know that I believe I'm falling in love with you and I don't want to let you walk away from me until you realized you're aren't going to get rid of me that easily. I know you may think I'm the shallowest man on earth and I appreciate beauty as much as the next man, but I've learned no matter how perfect the wrapping appears to be on the outside, the inside may be from a thrift store."

Mary laughed and so did he. "Alec, that was bad."

"Yeah, I know." He leaned down and placed a kiss to her temple. "I want you Mary, the good and the bad. Give me a chance to prove my sincerity."

Mary wanted to believe him. What if he ended up resenting her within time? How would a man known for his sexual prowess be able to abstain on those days, she was hurting so badly in her private areas that she wouldn't be able to wear clothing much less, make love.

"Alec, you don't have anything to prove to me. In spite of my occasional lack of judgment, I know in my heart you are a decent man. I see it in the respect, admiration, and loyalty of those who have been working for your company for years. Everything I heard had more to do with your bad choices of women, then of you personally." Mary said. "My HS is more than even I bargained for, I can't expect you to hold me when I can't make love to you, or clean and bandaged the lesions I can't reach, it's asking too much."

"Who helps you now?" There was a gentle softness in his voice.

"My parents, mostly."

"Does it make them love you any less because of it?" he asked.

"Of course not," she snapped.

"So why do you think a man that loves you would be any less understanding and devoted to your needs?"

Mary had no answer to his question.

"Use me Mary," Alec whispered frantically against her ear and she tried to break his hold on her, but she couldn't, and after a moment of futile struggling, she no longer wanted to.

"Do you know what you're asking?" She asked weakly. "I'm a burden on my parents, I don't want to become the same to you."

"You've become precious to me, sweetheart. It will be a burden I'm willing to take."

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Mary turned in his arms and looked up into his face, searching for any doubts and she didn't see anything but the same sincerity she witnessed earlier. "If you really feel that you can deal with what I have, then there is something I want to ask you to do for me."

"Tell me, I'll do anything within my power." Alec touched her full lips with one finger.

"I want you to be my first lover." Mary blurted out.

Alec's chin dropped and his left eyebrow raised a fraction. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure that I'm attracted to you and I desire you. I'm not looking for commitment or marriage. I want you for your experience." Mary felt her heart pounding in her chest as she awaited his answer.

"All you want from me, is to take your virginity?"

She swallowed audibly and answered his question with a half-truth. "Yes, that's all I want, and then you can go back to your life and I can go back to mine. It will also give us the chance to explore this sexual tension between us"

His hands dropped away and instantly Mary felt deprived of Alec's emotional and physical warmth. His expression was cold as he fixed his eyes on her face.

"I see." He raked a hand through his hair. "You're telling me you want me to take this precious gift from you and afterwards I'm to walk away and move on to the next, whatever?" He finished with a shrug of his shoulders.

Mary put some space between them. At that moment with him standing there before her with arms folded across his chest, she felt as if she was invading his personal space. She felt instant panic, realizing her mistake.

"Forget that I asked. It wasn't my intention to insult you."

"I'm not insulted," Alec said abruptly. "I just expected more, from you."

"Really?" Mary felt resentful of his tone. She felt as if he was judging her. Before she could stop herself she was lashing out. "Just twenty-four hours ago I expected you to be proposing to Erica during the holidays!"

Alec remained silent and she forged ahead.

"Tell me Alec, are you truly ready for a more substantial relationship or are you using me as an excuse not to propose to Erica? Are you capable of being in a serious relationship?"

Alec chuckled and it wasn't humorous. Shaking his head, he said, "I'm disappointed in you, Mary."

Her head snapped back as if he'd hit her. She didn't know what she expected, but that wasn't it, "What...what do you mean you're disappointed in me?"

"I mean, I would have thought you would have expected more from any man after holding

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on to your virginity this long with both fist.” He released a long breath, crossing his arms over his broad chest. “Why are you so anxious to throw in towel and settle for a casual tryst now?”

Mary licked her dry lips, her stomach fluttered with nervous jitters. “Last night you made me feel things I never felt before and you weren’t repulsed by my scars and I felt comfortable being with you.”

“So why not make me your first lover,” he muttered disdainfully.

“Alec what the hell you want me to say?”

“I don’t know if there is anything else you can say Mary.” Alec stared at her. “I’m good enough to fuck obviously, but if I suppose anything serious is out of the question. It’s not what I expected out of you at all.”

“Now you’re being an ass!” Mary huffed in frustration. “I suppose I’m making a lot of assumptions here, so tell me what do you expect from me?”

“First, tell me, do you trust me?”

“Would I want to have sex with you if I didn’t?”

“That isn’t a answer,” he pointed out.

“Yes,” Mary answered reluctantly. “I trust you.”

“With your heart?” His eyes narrowed at her silence. “That’s what I thought. I want you to be honest, Mary, if you could have a Christmas wish, what would it be? To lose your virginity without love?”

Mary shook her head her eyes shifted from his face to stare at her hands gripped tightly together.

“Tell me, sweetheart, if you could have one Christmas wish what would it be?” He asked again.

Did she really want to share her hearts desire with him? Maybe she should withdraw her request while she still had some dignity left.

“I wish...” she swallowed deeply. “I wish I would meet a wonderful man that would love me to distraction, propose marriage and want to start a family immediately,” she confessed.

She wasn’t surprised that he didn’t have anything to say about her wish.

“You asked,” Mary mumbled. Her shoulders became erect and she raised her head to look him straight in the eyes. “Are you ready for all that, Alec? You see even though I asked you to relieve me of my virginity. I wasn’t stupid enough to believe you wanted anything serious with me, at the end of the day you’re still my boss and I’m still your assistant.”

“Mary,” he said her name softly and reached out for her. “We have more then that going for us. *Dammit, I--*”

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She took a step back and held up a hand to keep him at bay. Dolefully his hands dropped back to his sides.

“Don’t say another word, Alec.” Mary interrupted. “I don’t think I can take anymore of this deep conversation this early in the morning. Just forget I even asked you. I’m going to go and get some work done.”

“Sweetheart, don’t shut down now. We need to discuss this. So hear me out and--”

“No, not now.” Mary said bluntly, her eyes burning. “Besides, I only asked because, well you know why, but you can’t even give me a simple “yes” or “no”, so you know what? I’m not interested any more. I don’t want my first time to be pity sex,” she spouted.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“You know for a moment, I thought that giving you my virginity without strings attached would be enough, for you, but in all reality, you’re just looking for a kind way to say thanks, but no thanks.” Mary held her head in her hands. “How could I be so stupid to think you had feelings for me?”

“Do you think I don’t have feelings for you, Mary?” He snapped. “I know you are a virgin but you’re not simple. You asked me to take your virginity because you know that my body can’t fake these erections that plague me whenever you’re near me. You asked me because you know I have feelings for you!”

“I asked you because you’re a very sexual man, we are alone together, and your options are limited,” she stated. Silently she wished she could believe her own words but in truth, she asked him because she was in love with him and she couldn’t imagine her first time being with anyone but Alec.

He released a string of curses, placing his hands on his hips. Looking down at the ground he shook his head. “Do you realize what you’re saying? You’re coming up with excuses and arguing with me because you’ve fallen in love with me, haven’t you.”

“Please, step aside, I have a lot to do today.” Mary looked away, he was better at reading her than she thought.

“It can wait,” he declared. “You can deny it if you want, but I know you’re crazy about me, because I’m crazy about you. We have something profound developing between us. I’m not talking about lust, I know lust, this is much more, and I’m not going to stand here and allow you to turn it into something casual because of your insecurities.”

Mary looked him in his eyes, now a beautiful turbulent green, his face was blotched an unattractive red in obvious anger and she still found him to be the most handsome man she’d ever met.

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"Take a good look at *me*, Alec. Are you ready to give up life, as you know it? Not only will you have the gawking and stares when we go out together but there is a lot of things I physically couldn't share with you."

Mary's voice arose an octave as she continued in a frantic rant. She needed to make sure Alec knew exactly what he was getting, because she couldn't bare to chance investing her heart and soul in loving him only for him to tell her one day he made a mistake.

"Sweetheart, it's not like this is something that is your fault," he said splaying his hands wide. "It doesn't change the fact that I have developed strong feelings for you."

"Honey," Mary closed the space between them. "I need you to understand I can't stay out in the sun for long periods of time. You love going out on your boat and spending your days tanning in the sun in exotic destinations. My body temperature must stay below a certain temperature or I burn from the inside out. So much so that it actually produces heat rashes on my body. Please, understand this. My body is my worse enemy and I don't want it to become yours."

"Mary, I'm a ridiculously wealthy man, I have a small yacht, not a boat. It has air conditioning along with the amenities of a four star hotel, including a full staff to cater to your needs and an onboard doctor." Alec reasoned. "You can come out on deck for as long as you wish, and when you're feeling overheated go down below and relax." He grasped her shoulders and squeezed. "When you're overheated, walk around naked if you want to. I may become overheated," he teased. "But I won't complain."

This time she didn't move away from his touch. Alec had listened to her, and now she would do the same for him.

"In addition to the things I love to do in the sun, I also love winter sports and quiet days here, just like we're doing now. As far as our being seen together is concerned, baby, having you on my arm all over town will make me happy. You know why?" He paused. "Because you mean something to *me* and our happiness is all we should be concerned about." He finished by briefly touching her lips with his forefinger before once again dropping his hands to his side.

"Whew Boy," Mary chuckled. "You sure do know how to say all the right things." She covered her face with both hands and shook her head. "Alec, I know you're a good man. I'm ashamed that I asked you to take my virginity for all the wrong reasons. Selfish reasons. How about we start over again and forget that I even asked."

"I don't want to forget any of this, but you're right. We can't become lovers if it isn't for the right reasons. I don't want you to someday look at me and feel as if everything I've said and done since meeting you have been some big seduction on my part," he said. "When you lose

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your virginity, I want it to be because you are deeply in love with that person, even if it's not me."

She didn't miss his voice faltering on that last statement. Mary bit her lip to stifle the outcry of emotions that threatened to spill forth. She wanted to tell him she asked him because she was deeply in love and had been for the past two years working in his office building. Watching him from a distance, she had learned so much more about him than any tabloid article. He was a kind, honest and sincere man.

Yes, he was also a womanizer, but the one thing Mary had learned, is not one of those women had gone in with their eyes closed. Alec was always very forth coming in the fact that he wasn't looking for a deep relationship or marriage. So she was sure he wouldn't be saying all this to her if he wasn't serious and he also would have not argued this virginity issue if he wanted to have sex with her.

"Thank you," she spoke softly. "You're a good man, Alec Mercer, in spite of your reputation. I will admit that if I was mistaking empathy for something else, I didn't want to make a fool of myself, so I wanted to make it easy for you to take me to your bed and walk away afterwards."

Her voice had fallen barely above a whisper when she spoke causing him to lean down closer. Mary lifted her chin, meeting his warm fixed stare straight on.

"Mary, this isn't empathy, I think I --"

She placed her hand over his mouth, cutting off the words.

"Shhh, don't say it. Not now." She said in a rush of words. "So much has already been said in the past hour. I just told you about my HS and when I shared this secret with other men who thought they wanted to go further with me, they would comfort me and empathize," she admitted.

After a long pause, during which she struggled with self-control of the painful emotions her confession brought to surface.

"Alec, I mistook their concerns for love, and assumed they would be in my life for the long haul only to never hear from them again." She touched the side of his face. "It's too soon for either of us to say the words because once their said, it will change everything. We won't be able to go back to just being co-workers."

"So you're saying if I were to tell you *I love you* at this moment, you wouldn't believe it even if it was the truth."

"Exactly."

Alec released a long sigh and shoved his hands into his pocket. Mary dropped her hand from his face and painted on a happy smile.

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"Breakfast was wonderful. Now I really must get the contracts due to be expressed the day after tomorrow finished," she announced.

"Hey, I thought we were going out." Alec called out turning to gaze after her as she danced past him.

"Yeah," she turned on her heels slowly walking backwards, away from him before she changed her mind and went with her urge to kiss him. "You know we did come here to work first, play later. The week will be gone and before you know it, and the house will become full with friends and family. We still have the decorations to get started on. Busy...busy!"

"Do you want to want to kiss me as badly as I want to kiss you right now?" Alec asked aloud what she was thinking.

A mischievous smile was on his face and her stomach did a summersault. Mary released an inward groan as a familiar damp heat spread between her legs. Sweet memories of his fingers delving inside her, his thumb strumming and encircling her clitoris, flooded her thoughts.

"Oh yeah," she answered him breathlessly.

"We can do it...kiss, I mean," he offered strolling slowly out of the kitchen towards her. His hands shoved into the pockets of his tight black jeans.

Mary's eye's dipped briefly to the bulge between his long muscular thighs. *Damn he is wearing the hell out of those jeans.*

"Yes we could." Mary paused at the foot of the steps. "But I don't think that would be enough for me right at this moment."

He grinned. "You say that like it's a bad thing. We can do a lot of cuddling and fondling like last night. I don't know about you but I work better when I'm not this tense."

"Well, I work well under pressure, so I will see you around lunch time!" Mary was amazed at how quickly she could run up a flight of stairs. She was well aware Alec was taking full advantage of the view he was getting from the bottom of the stairs.

"Mary," he called out.

She paused and turned as she reached the landing. She felt like Juliet from the Shakespearean play, *Romeo and Juliet*.

"Yes?"

"While you're working I will start bringing the decorations down from the attic."

"Okay." She took a step towards her room.

"And Mary," he called out again.

She stopped and turned once more. "Yes, Alec?" She lifted an inquiring eyebrow.

"Lady, you're putting me on a slow burn for the rest of the day and I'm not complaining, but

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you better be ready to suffer the consequences.”

“Consequences?” She cocked her head to the side a slight frown puckered her brow.

“Yep, later this evening we will be doing some cuddling and kissing or my name ain’t Alec Mercer. So you better start getting accustomed to the idea.”

Alec shoved his hand in his pocket fingering the diamond engagement ring that had once belonged to his grandmother, his mind racing, trying to align his influences. He figured that once he convinced Mary he was sincere in his pursuit, he would tell her how he felt, but he needed to show her first. Despite her protest he knew she was interested or she would never had considered him to be her first lover and if he could help it, her last.

He opened up the safe in the library and placed the ring back inside. Alec decided it would be best to start by allowing her to set the pace. To give her time to get use to his company, his kisses and touches until she craved them as much as he did her lips, her body. Finally, he had found the right woman and now he had to find the right time to ask her to marry him and prayed she’d believe him once he confessed his feelings.

Mary would be concerned about her family and friends, not to mention the fact that he was her boss. Would she continue to work with him? Being his wife if she didn’t want to work at all he would understand, but what if she was as concerned about his infidelity as Erica had been when she insisted that he hire a less attractive assistant? Hell, Mary was already feeling insecure about them being seen as a couple, she may want to hand pick his assistant.

Alec grinned at the thoughts of Mary being possessive of him. He’d never been a possessive man but the thought of Mary being with another man made his eyes cross with jealousy. He wanted to teach her all about the pleasures of the flesh, while she helped him to have the loving and nurturing marriage like his parents.

In the past he was the one that had planned to make his career his entire life. He had never planned on marrying, that was his brother’s dream. He was the one that wanted the wife, lots of children and a home he built with his own two hands. Now that he was gone, everyone assumed that he wanted the same thing. He suppose he should, seeing how the legacy of his family was left up to him to carry on and as his mother pushed, the more of a burden he found it to be.

That first night he spent time with Mary in her small townhouse, he felt more at home then he did in his own penthouse apartment towering over the city. The ease in which she teased him while encouraging him to try new Chinese dishes, feeding him samples using *her* chopsticks, and despite the fact he was a near stranger she used the same chopsticks to finish her meal. It was their first indirect kiss and she was too innocent to realize the impact her natural sensuality had

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on him.

Alec felt a familiar hardening in his crotch. He shook his head, pushing away all thoughts of sexing Mary. He needed to remain focused on the objective. He had a week alone with her before his family and possibly hers, invaded. If he hadn't made any leeway before then, he might as well hold off on proposing until after the holidays. Still, he wanted to go into the New Year knowing Mary was going to be a part of his future.

His sweet unpretentious Mary had legitimate health concerns. How was he to make her understand that it didn't matter to him? He loved her for who she was and all the things that came with her, so her concerns were now his concerns.

Alec took a seat behind his desk and opened his laptop computer. After several times searching for a disease he couldn't spell, he found what he was looking for and settled in to learn as much as he could about Hidradenitis Suppurativa.

Moments later with tears in his eyes and a grim look on his face he shut his computer off, but he couldn't blot out the pictures of the damage HS could do. Mary's current case must be contained in comparison to some of the others with this illness, not to say within time hers won't progress.

Alec did what he always did when he needed sound advice. He picked up the phone and placed a call to his Dad.

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CHAPTER NINE

The door opened with only a brief knock just as Mary had finished putting on her yellow silk nightgown, a brush poised to do her nightly one hundred strokes. It was Alec and he didn't look happy.

"What are you doing in my room? You didn't even knock."

"I did so knock."

"Barely."

"What's going on? You didn't come down for lunch, you didn't come down for dinner, and you barely touched the tray George brought up to you."

"I'm a grown woman, Alec, I can fend for myself." Mary put the brush on the dresser and moved to the bed to put on the matching robe. I didn't have much of an appetite and I've been busy. All the new contracts are completed and you can fax them at any time."

"Trust me, I can see you're a grown woman and in all the right places."

His voice, deep and sensual, sent a ripple of awareness through her. Mary pulled the robe close and tied the sash at the waist, stopping short at smiling over his obvious disappointment.

"You finished a weeks worth of work in one day?"

"If I'm going to go home and spend Christmas with my family, I figured the sooner I was done the more time I would have for other things, such as decorating. Now we can spend tomorrow on decorating."

"We won't be decorating tomorrow," Alec stated. "We, have plans."

Mary arched a brow. "More business?"

"No, but--"

"I'll stay here and get started and you can go and take care of whatever plans you have," Mary reasoned.

Alec rubbed his right temple. Mary didn't mean to upset him, but her emotions were all over the place. She felt a longing so deep it almost doubled her over from the pain. She wanted Alec and most of all she wanted to be sure he wanted her. How was she suppose to know what was truth and what wasn't. She's been a fool before, but was it fair to place Alec in the same group

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with the other men that had disappointed her?

Mary had her doubts about Alec, how could she not? He made having sex and letting go of his assistants after they became clingy and demanding, a norm. He had done it so often, his employees began placing bets on how long it would take him to get the assistant in his bed and how long would she last after. After they return to the office and their relationship became public, she would become the laughing stock of the office until she would have no choice but to quit.

Did she really want to alienate the friendships she'd developed with her co-workers, for the possibility that he loved her? Could she trust him to be the same Alec back home that he was here when they were practically alone?

"Why are you staring at me like that?" He broke into her thoughts and she turned away from his questioning wonder.

"Was I? I didn't mean to stare." She released a long breath. "I was thinking about something."

"Some *thing*, or me?"

"A little of both."

"Mary, about tomorrow." Alec moved forward. "I want you to spend the day with me."

She saw he was actually shifting from foot to foot as he awaited her answer. He looked so adorable standing there. She didn't think she'd ever seen him so nervous before. How could she turn him down now? She couldn't.

"What time do I need to be ready?"

His face split into a wide breathtaking smile, making her happy she agreed.

"About eight," he answered. "Make sure you dress comfortable and warm."

"I'll be ready."

"Thank you, Mary."

"You're welcome."

"Uh...don't eat breakfast, we'll get something while we're out," he said.

"Sounds great."

Mary thought he would leave, but he seemed to have something more on his mind. She wanted very badly for him to stay with her tonight. Just to feel his arms around her as she slept, would be enough. She didn't look forward to the sleepless night she knew was to come.

Alec came up behind her and grasped her shoulders. Mary stared at their reflection in the mirror as his dark head bent and nuzzled the side of her neck.

"Sweet Mary, you smell of mangos and all I can do is wonder what other places on you that

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carry this scent. Is it a bath gel or is it lotion? Do you rub it all over or in certain areas such as your neck,” he murmured breathing a kiss there. “Here on your shoulder?”

His deep husky voice caused a warmth to spread from her tingling nipples to her throbbing clitoris.

“Alec--” Mary licked her lips, her breath coming in tiny puffs.

“Mary” he interrupted. “You can hate me for this later,” he murmured. “But please, don’t stop me now. Let me touch you for a moment.”

She didn’t think she could stop him now even if she wanted to. She’d spent the entire day working alone, with thoughts of him distracting her to the point of madness. Anything he wanted to do to her now that he had come to her, she was a willing participant, damning all the negatives that may come afterwards.

Mary drank in the comfort of his nearness, caught up entirely by her own emotions. Their intertwined reflection in the mirror with their masculine and feminine contrast along with the paleness of his fingers on her dark skin pushing the yellow satin robe off her shoulders.

He tugged her closer until the back of her body leaned into his. His hands roamed her body, caressing and teasing.

She felt extraordinarily...extraordinary. Slight undercurrents of delight coursed through her everywhere Alec touched, followed by little quivers of anticipation. When his hand slid up into her hair to tug gently, she let her head tilt to the side and turned slightly in his arms, her eyes opened heavy lidded watching his lips lower to hers. What started out as a leisurely kiss suddenly turned into an expedition for gratification.

Breaking the kiss Alec breathed against her mouth, “I need you.”

“Now, please,” she exhaled with relief. She was so sure she was ready, her entire body vibrated with reckless desire.

“Mary,” he kissed her once more.

“Yes...oh yes...” she turned in his arms until she was facing him. He had such a beautifully exquisite mouth.

“Do you feel as if your entire body is about to go into flames? Do you have an ache deep inside making you feel needy and lonely?”

“God, yesss,” she moaned against his lips.

“Good.”

Stunned Mary pulled her head back to look up at him.

“You knew you left me on slow burn this morning and I spent the entire day yearning to see your smile, hear your laughter, taste your lips, and hold you in my arms just like this.”

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Mary blushed. She had been caught, but it wasn't a womanly ploy on her part as much as it was fear that she might not be as ready as she thought she was to become more intimate with Alec. Yet, now she realized how childish she was being, because the minute he touched her all the doubts she may have had, disappeared.

His long fingers comb through her hair as he held her face in his hands. Pressing a tender kiss her mouth once again, he pulled away and said with a grin, "One of the things I adore about you Mary is your honesty and the fact that you don't play games that other women like to play. Today felt like you were playing one of those games."

"I'm sorry." She licked her lips. "The more I thought about cuddling and kissing you the more frightened I became from the expectation alone."

"I see." His eyebrow lifted with his inquiry. "Are you frightened now?"

"No, you didn't give me time to think about it."

"I'll remember next time not to give you any fair warnings," he winked at her. "See you bright and early in the morning, sweet Mary."

Without another word, just like that, he turned on his heels, and strode out of the bedroom.

Mary knees trembled. She set on the bed touching her tingling mouth with her fingertips.

"Damn."

After another restless night with visions of Mary dancing in his head, Alec was aware of unrequited tension in his muscles. He felt growing excitement awaiting her to walk through the door of the media room.

After her heated response to his kisses the night before he was more determined to make Mary his. After confiding in his parents that he had found someone he was serious about, to the delight of his mother, she was forthcoming with suggestions and good advice. Starting with showing Mary his true self. The parts of him he kept hidden from public consumption.

"Alec?"

He turned at the sound of her voice and smiled. Mary had on jeans and a peach cashmere sweater, her shoulder length hair was in girlish two girlish pigtails, a delightful change from her bun, single ponytail, or twisted atop her head.

He appreciated her natural beauty. She didn't use layers of cosmetics to give the illusion of prettiness. She didn't have to. Alec couldn't recollect all the times his bed pillows were ruined by messy streaks and smears left from models that refused to be seen in the all natural. With their makeup rubbed off on his pillow, leaving their faces bare to scrutiny, often he felt as if he went to bed with one woman and woke up with another.

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With Mary, he knew exactly what he was getting and he knew that every morning when he woke up next to her, she would look at him the way she was looking at him now with those beautiful expressive eyes.

She thought she could hide behind her glasses all her emotions and feelings, but it was far from true, for they actually magnified her expression and without them, the vulnerability and mistrust he saw in them nearly unmanned him.

He knew Mary wanted him physically, but lust wasn't a lasting emotion. What Alec needed was for Mary to stop over-thinking the situation and listen to what her heart was telling her. If not, he knew she would regret making love to him afterwards. If she hadn't been a virgin he probably would have gave in to his sexual prowess to increase their emotional bond. Logically, she couldn't get past the fact that he was a man known for being the best one-night-stand a woman could have, single or married. He hadn't been picky.

He didn't blame her for her doubts. He deserved it because it never occurred to him during his escapades that he would fall in love with a woman who morals were so different from his own.

"Morning, am I late?" Mary asked.

Her hands worked at the hemline of her sweater as she fidgeted. Alec shook his head realizing he was gawking like a fresh face schoolboy with his first crush, obviously making her uncomfortable in the process.

"Uh, no. I was just thinking how lovely you look this morning. I like that peach color on you. It compliments your beautiful brown skin."

Mary blushed prettily. "Thank you. I hoped it was okay. You did say to dress comfortable and warm..." her voice trailed off into a smile.

He took in her short slightly spaced teeth and perfect plump heart-shaped mouth and longed to waltz over to her until they were breathless like the night before. It took more will power than he thought he possessed to walk out of the bedroom and leave her alone.

"Alec, are these boots okay? I may be too casual. You didn't say where we were going." Mary looked down at herself, her ponytails brushing forward over her cheeks.

Alec found her totally adorable. How could she be so unaware of her own appeal? She made him feel hopeful and excited about the future. Every since his brother died he'd been in the reckless spiral to have every thrill imaginable, because life was too short. It took his mother pointing out that his current behavior could cause his life to be shorter than necessary and she had no intentions of losing both of her sons to foolish nonsense.

He absently wondered if his slowing down at his mother's request and starting to think about

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marriage is what allowed him to see what has been right in front of his eyes all along. Mary. If this was so, he had a lot to thank his mother for. Never had he felt this way and it felt damn good. Being with her was as freeing as climbing mountains, deep sea diving or jumping out of planes. With her he felt as if he were pulling the parachute at the last possible minute making it both exciting and scary at the same time.

Being in love had made him feel more alive than any thrill seeking adventure he partook in these past few years.

Alec smiled at Mary and said, "Mary every time I look at you I discover something new that I hadn't notice before."

"Really! It's my hair, isn't it?" Her hands flew up to her head. "These ponytails look silly on a thirty-two year old woman, don't they? If you wait just a moment I can--"

"Baby, you look wonderful so stop fidgeting." He chuckled moving forward to take her hand and bring it up to his lips. "I love your hair. I love your smile, and I love what you're wearing. Most of all I love the anticipation I feel when I'm watching you. Do you have any idea how many different expressions, I've seen on your beautiful face?"

"Now I know you didn't get much sleep, you called me beautiful," Mary mumbled.

He felt he tugging to get her hand loose from his, but he kept his hold on her grasping her other hand by the wrist forcing her to face him. He pulled her against him holding her arms pinned behind her back while his eyes looked deeply in to hers.

"God, you are truly oblivious to how lovely you are, aren't you?" Alec shook his head in disbelief. "Let me speak from my vast experience with beautiful women. Mary, you are the first woman to steal my breath away with your smile." He saw a cloud of doubt come over her features and said, "I know what you're thinking, but before you start doubting what I'm saying to you, look at me Mary. Look into my eyes. Do you think I'm lying to you? Does the reaction my body has to yours when I'm holding you lie to you?"

He held still, his erection pressing hard into her upper stomach as her head arched back to look up at him and search his face. He didn't know what to expect, but the shimmering of tears in her eyes wasn't one of them. He softened his hold not wanting her to feel he was exerting his strength to keep her in his arms.

"Alec, when you speak to me this way, I can't think reasonably."

"Don't think, Mary, do what I'm doing. Go with your feelings." He bent his head and before placing his lips over hers, he murmured, "I adore your mouth."

"And I like the way your mouth feels against mine," she murmured back.

Pleasantly surprised at her admittance, he forged ahead. Settling his mouth over hers until

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they molded together perfectly, in spite of their height difference their bodies seemed to fit in all the right places.

Alec inserted his tongue into her mouth, deeply and she reciprocated. Releasing her wrist he grasped her jean clad bottom and lifted her against him. Mary gasped in surprise and pulled back to look at him.

“Alec, I...I’m too heavy.” Mary protested. “Please, put me down before you hurt yourself, Boy!”

“Does it feel like I’m going to drop you?”

“No, it feels wonderful. You know, no one has ever picked me up like this before,” she said softly, a lone tear rolled over her cheek. “I suppose it’s because of my size. I often had nightmares of my husband trying to lift me up and carry me over the threshold and it would become this horrible comedy spoof. I never imagined any man would be able to lift me up in his arms like this.”

“I’m made of sturdy stuff woman,” he spoke in a soothing voice. “I will hold you like this as long as you let me.”

“You promise?”

“On my life.”

Mary pressed her lips to his and Alec held on to her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his hips. He knew being between her round thighs would be heaven, but he would have enjoyed it more if there were no clothing between them.

He pulled his head back and rested his forehead against hers. The air blew hot between them as they fought to regain some semblance of control. Her dark hair swept forward clinging to the roughness of his unshaved face. Once Alec broke the kiss he saw the redness he left around her mouth, a sure tell sign of what they’d been up to. It would soon fade but for now he took pleasure in leaving his mark upon her.

“What are you thinking?” Mary asked.

“I’m thinking that I would like nothing better than to move you over to the sofa and kiss you until we don’t know where my lips start and yours end.”

“I’m game,” she gave him an inviting grin that almost made him give in, but he had made plans and it was important that they arrived on time.

“No can do sweetheart, we are expected for breakfast and if we don’t leave now we’ll be late.”

Mary groaned her disappointment as he eased her down his body until her feet touched the ground.

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Alec removed the remote key from his pocket pressing the button to start the car so it could start warming up.

“Well it’s a good thing we are going outside,” she commented grinning up at him. “I think the frigid air will do us some good.”

“Amen.” Alec agreed returning her smile with one of his own. He held her coat for her as she slid her arms inside. She turned towards him and he wrapped the matching soft scarf around her neck, pulling her in for another kiss before spinning her towards the door with a playful slap to her ample rear. “Get, before I change my mind about going out today.”

“Ouch,” she rubbed her bottom and licked her tongue at him before taking off out of the media room towards the front door.

Alec chuckled at her girlish giggles. He enjoyed this feeling of playful happiness that swept through him. He shoved his arms in his coat and followed her out the door. Before he pulled the front door shut a clump of snow hit him in the side of the face.

“What!” He sputtered snow out of his mouth with a laugh seeing Mary standing beside the SUV with a big grin on her face. “What did you do that for?”

“I figured you needed help coolin’ off,” she yelled at him over the idling engine.

“You better be glad I don’t have time to get you wetter then you already are, or I would give you a snowball fight you’d never forget.”

“I’m not wet--”

Alec caught her eyes and winked with a wicked grin making it clear he wasn’t talking about “water” wet. From her open mouth stare the pun hadn’t been lost on her. Before she could say another word. He rushed her and kissed her surprised open mouth before opening the car door for her to step up inside. Jogging around to the other side, he hopped in. Finally they were off, and not a minute too late. His heart felt light and he was looking forward to the rest of their day together.

“Now can you tell me where we are going?” Mary spoke breaking the companionable silence.

Alec steered off the Mercer Ranch onto the main road towards town. “I’m taking you to meet someone very special to me. You’re in for a treat because she’s cooking up a big breakfast, just for us.” Alec said.

“I see,” Mary said softly. “It’s nice of *her* to invite me too. Does she live up here?”

“It’s about a thirty minute drive depending on the roads leading down the mountain and the traffic on the two-lane road leading into Leavenworth.”

“Has she lived in Leavenworth long?”

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"Before we built the mountain holiday home, we'd spend the holidays with her. We use to go up to the mountain to ski and stumbled upon the property the ranch is on for sale," he supplied.

"It sounds as if you've known this woman for a long time." Mary spoke so softly he had to lean to the side to hear her.

"All my life." Alec answered with a smile.

Mary quietly nodded and looked at her hands in her lap.

After they drove another mile or two Alec became aware that Mary had become very still focusing all her attention on the scenic view outside the window. Her brow was puckered as if something was bothering her.

Figuring she would tell him in her own good time, he decided to leave her to her thoughts. He reached over to turn on the radio and let the cheerful melodies of Christmas soothe the harshness of the growing silence.

"Oh, Alec this place is lovely. It looks as if we're in one of those small village towns in Europe!"

He felt such relief at her growing excitement upon entering the quaint little town. He was beginning to wonder if he had said something to upset her.

"Welcome to Leavenworth, Washington. The architecture here was structured after a Bavarian Village. They have wonderful gift shops and festivities all year around." Alec explained.

"Will we have time to stop and look in the shops?" Mary asked.

"We have all day, my sweet." He reached across the seat where her hand rested and squeezed it briefly before returning to the steering wheel to make a right turn.

"So how much further to this...*woman's*...place that you mentioned?" She cocked her head to the side in question.

"We're here." Alec announced as he turned on his blinker and right turned once more onto a pebble-stone driveway partly covered in a light dusting of snow.

Alec steered and parked beside an antique aqua-green 1957 Chevy. To his surprise, before he could get out of the car to open the door for Mary, she'd let herself out and was standing staring with wide-eyed delight at the bright pink cottage house.

"This, is your friend's home?" Mary asked reading the hanging wooden sign alighted with Christmas lights. *Ladybird Cottage*. "What is this place?"

Alec beamed and announced, "My home away from home."

"It's absolutely lovely!" She laughed and touched the white picket fence that surrounded the

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walkway leading up to the front door.

"Yup, a lot of great memories were created here for me and my brother. Especially during the summers."

"Really? I bet it's even more beautiful in the spring and summer. I can imagine beautiful arrays of flowers all about the courtyard." Mary turned her wide smile on him and immediately he felt warmth spread over him.

"Yes. We sat on that porch swing right there sipping the best lemonade you've ever tasted." Alec swung open the white gate for Mary to enter first. He felt excitement bubbling in the pit of his stomach. He couldn't wait to introduce her to the woman waiting inside.

Reaching out his hand he linked his fingers with hers. She looked hesitant for a moment before she fell in step beside him. He laughed at Mary's chuckle when she heard the chimes of bells playing the *Sound of Music*, from the movie with the same title as Alec pushed open the door. With his hand resting comfortably in the small of her back, he ushered her inside.

"She's a big fan of the movie," he whispered.

"I like that movie too, I sing along every time I watch it," Mary blurted out.

"Then you'll fit in nicely with this family, young lady." A soft motherly voice with a heavy unfamiliar accent spoke, announcing her entrance.

The elderly woman ambled forth with a wide grin, her fleshy arms opened wide in welcome to Alec who swept her short stout figure off her feet and twirled her around placing a big wet kiss on her cheek.

"It's a shame I only see you during the holidays, Al. While I have to put up with that mother of yours visiting and telling me she is going to move me to Seattle to live with them." She patted his shoulders making him lower her to the ground. "Just because I'm old, I will not be bullied."

"That's because we worry about you being here alone, Mummo."

"The deal is you give me some great grandbabies and I'll give up the bed and breakfast to help out with the babies, but you know I need to keep busy. There will be time enough for resting when I'm dead."

Alec scowled. "Don't speak like that, Mummo, you will surely outlive us all."

"From your mouth to God's ears. Now enough of our rudeness, who is this lovely girl, you brought to see me?"

"I'm sorry." Alec grabbed Mary's hand and tugged her forward placing her hand in his grandmother's hand. "Mary, I want you to meet my grandmother, Ava Zhender."

"Nice, to meet you, Mrs. Zhender." Mary embraced the woman in return as she wrapped her arms about her in a hug. "Thank you for having me here. You have a lovely home. The

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Victorian décor is exactly what I expected when I walked through the door. It feels as if I stepped back in time.”

“No...no Mrs. Zhender, child, call me Mummo, like my darling, Al.” The older woman patted Mary's hand and held it in hers.

Taking hold of Alec's hand with the other one she lead them further into the sitting room, a wide smile on her rouged lips.

“Mary, these are furnishings that were brought over from Europe by my parents. I hoped to leave all of this to Al, but he has no need of such things. Except for the sentimental value, I wouldn't know why he would want to keep them.”

“Sentimental value is priceless,” Mary spoke up. “Anyone can see the history and love that you have placed in this home.” She smiled and gently squeezed Mummo's hand. “I can't imagine the furnishings being in a more perfect place then right here. Hopefully, this is something you and Alec won't have to worry about for a long time.”

“Oh, you are a dear. I'm so happy Al, brought you here to visit me.” She chuckled warmly and her cherub face broke into a grin as her green eyes twinkled like a child with a secret. “Come...come, little ones, get those coats off, and hang them over there to dry, Al. I hope the both of you are hungry because breakfast is nearly ready. The other guests should be down shortly.”

“Other guest?” Mary asked looking at Alec over his grandmother's head.

“After my grandfather passed away Mummo turned the place into a Bed and Breakfast. She provides, breakfast and tea with her famous scones late in the afternoon to all the guest that are in house.” He explained. “How many are currently in residence, Mummo?”

“There is this sweet newlywed couple, along with a salesman that's just passing through. We practically have the place to ourselves.” Ava tugged them both closer so that she could whisper in a conspirator's voice, “The Salesman is an old Scrooge, no personality at all. If we're lucky, he will skip breakfast as he has for the past two mornings he's been here. Tonight will be his last night and he will be checking out at noon tomorrow. Thank God.”

“Mummo, why didn't you turn him away, it's not like you need his money. You do this to stay busy and you definitely don't have to put up with any inconsiderate bastard,” Alec stated.

“I know...I know...but, what kind of person would I be if I turned a soul away, especially around Christmas, just because I don't like his behavior. Maybe that's why he's the way he is,” Mummo reasoned. “The man expects people to behave badly towards him, so he beats them to the punch I suppose.”

“I still don't like you're doing this, these days. It's dangerous.” Alec pointed out.

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“Getting in my Chevy is dangerous, but you think that’s going to stop me from driving? Now stop fretting, son” She waved his concern aside and changed the subject. “I hope you two brought an overnight bag, so you can stay for the festivities tonight at Front Street Park.”

“No, Mummo. Mary and I are just here for the day.”

“Nonsense, I insist you stay for the Starlight Lantern Parade. Mary, dear, do you bake?”

“Yes, I love cooking,” Mary piped in nodding her head.

“Oh marvelous, you can help me to make cookies to take over to the Nazarene Church. We will be serving free cookies and hot chocolate to those who are coming to see the live nativity scene.”

“Mummo, we won’t be able to stay until dark. When night falls, it may be impossible to make it back up to the house.” Alec tried to reason not wanting to put Mary on the spot.

“Al, I hear what you’re saying, but what does Mary have to say?” Ava paused and looked over to Mary. “This is her first time here and it’s her vacation isn’t it? Allow her to have some fun.”

Mary shrugged, looking up at Alec. “Well, it does sound like fun and with all the work I’ve been doing, maybe this will help it to feel more like it’s Christmas. Couldn’t we stay the night? Can’t we go and see if we can find what we need to get us through the night at one of the shops?”

Alec looked at her in surprise. He felt warmth deep inside at her use of the word “we”.

“You really don’t mind staying the night?” He asked looking her straight in the eyes to make sure. He knew how kind hearted Mary was and he didn’t want her saying yes just because his grandmother was standing here.

“You heard the girl the first time, because I did, Al.” His grandmother clucked her tongue and tugged at both of them “Come, I see the newlyweds are late as usual, maybe they will take a breather and join us...eventually.” Ava smiled and winked at Mary who laughed at her obvious meaning.

“I don’t know if I would be worried about food if I was honeymooning,” Alec mumbled, his inviting green eyes on Mary.

She reddened and looked away, nearly walking into Ava as she stopped abruptly at the dining room entrance.

“Mr. Hammonds, to what do we owe the honor of your presence at the breakfast table this morning?” Ava asked. “Alec, Mary, this is Mr. Hammonds, a traveling salesman from Wichita.”

Alec barely nodded at the man, while Mary spoke a soft “good morning”.

“I’m paying to eat, ain’t I? I saw you blushing gal,” he eyed Mary from head to toe with an insolent stare. “I do believe that’s the first time I saw a black person turn red. I didn’t even think

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such a thing was possible.” The harsh voice that greeted them in the dining room caught them all by surprised.

“Why you son-of-a--,” Alec stepped forward halting as Mary grabbed his arm and shook her head.

“Mr. Hammonds, I know you are a paying guest but this is *my* home. I will not have you being rude to anyone else in my home,” Ava spoke up.

“Oh really now.” The man’s eyes narrowed on Ava. “It’s bad enough I had to put up with the *Chinaman* and White woman couple every time I came down to breakfast, now this. It makes me sick to my stomach what the world is coming to today.” He commented to Ava nodding his head towards Alec and Mary. “Do the good townspeople know what kind of establishment you’re running here lady? You let all sorts in here, it’s plumb sickening.”

“Don’t speak to my grandmother that way!” Alec barked, still feeling Mary’s hand on his arm.

“Hey, don’t I know you from somewhere? Are you one of them actors or something? I swear I’ve seen you in magazines.”

“I wouldn’t think a Neanderthal such as yourself would pick up a magazine.” Alec said reigning in his building anger as he felt Mary quietly simmering beside him. “What do you do? Look at the pretty pictures?”

The older man leered at Alec and shouted, “I know who you are now. You’re that millionaire advertising executive, Alec Mercer. Well, well, aren’t you the one that I always see with those supermodels and socialites?” He chuckled. “Hell, this is a photo opportunity I’m sure the tabloids would love to have. You in some romantic hideaway with this short, fat, black--”

Before he could complete his sentence Alec lifted the man out of his seat at the dining room table by the lapels of his tweed jacket.

“Alec, no!” Mary and Ava spoke at the same time.

“Consider yourself lucky Hammonds, that ladies are present and this is my grandmother’s home. It’s the only reason you will be allowed to pack up your stuff and leave this house unmarred.” Alec’s tone was deep and menacing removing any doubts about his seriousness.

“Go ahead do your worse,” the older man growled. “You and your granny will have one helluv’ a lawsuit on your hands.”

“Do your worse and I promise you I will dig so deep into your life and past you will need a shovel to dig your way out of the red-tape shit I can heap on you. I have friends. Tell me when was the last time you were audited, Hammonds?”

“You...you can’t do that?”

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“Try me,” Alec countered. “You have ten minutes to get your stuff and get out. I will personally refund the cost of your stay here.”

“Mercer, you don’t scare me,” Hammonds argued.

“I make things happen,” Alec leered. “Trust me you do not want me as an enemy, sir. Mummo, why don’t you call the Sheriff? I’m sure he will be happy to give your guest a place to spend his last night, courtesy of the Leavenworth jailhouse. Either way you’re getting the hell out of here, right now.”

The man straightened his jacket and without another word stormed out of the dining area with Alec on his heels just in case the man needed help finding the door.

CHAPTER TEN

Mary looked at Alec's grandmother and smiled timidly. "Are you okay, you look a little pale."

"I'll be fine. I'm just not use to that kind of behavior. I hope this doesn't affect your decision to spend the night and join us in the festivities."

"Of course not." Mary assured her. "I just wished Alec hadn't overreacted. Ignorance comes from all sources and violence begets violence. Besides, the moment he recognized Alec he probably saw dollar signs and wanted him to hit him, just so he could sue."

"Sad, but true." Ava agreed. "Does this sort of bigotry happen to you and my grandson often?"

Stunned by what she was suggesting, Mary hurriedly shook her head in denial. "Oh, no, it's not what you're thinking. Alec and I are co-workers and friends...well, my boss. I'm just here to help him get caught up on some contracts."

"I see." Ava smiled a closed lipped smile. "So how long have you been in love with, Al?"

"I'm not--," Mary started to deny her feelings, but the look Ava gave her let her know that she wasn't fooling her. "I fell in love with him the moment I saw him. When I was hired on at Mercer a little before Halloween a few years ago, I was dressed up in costume and handing out baked goods to the office. I saw him sitting in his office through his open door. His face was deep in thought as he looked out his office door. For a moment his eyes met mine, just a glance really, and I was a goner. He's the most beautiful man I think I've ever seen that wasn't on television," Mary confessed her face flushed with emotions.

"Have you told Alec how you feel?"

For a moment, Mary felt horrified by the thought. "He knows I'm attracted to him, but I don't believe I have the nerve to tell him the extent of my feelings and I don't dare hope that their could actually be something serious going on between us."

Ava crossed her arms over her ample breast and leaned her hip against the entranceway of the door leading into what look to be the kitchen area. "May I ask why not? Surely you don't have an issue with your races being different, do you?"

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"No," Mary shook her head. "Well maybe a little, but not enough to keep me from loving him." She shrugged her shoulders, her arms dropping to her sides. She found it strange to be confessing all to Alec's grandmother, before she told Alec how she really felt about him.

"I see that I'm making you uncomfortable with my curiosity, but don't be, dear. I'm a woman and I've been around a long time. Sometimes others see things before the parties involved do," Ava said in a soothing voice.

"No, I needed to speak to someone about all these emotions." Mary gave the other woman a thankful smile. "I normally would have called my mother, but I didn't want her to get her hopes up. She always get overly excited when I bring up a man," she rolled her eyes and chuckled. "Grandbabies and all that, you know?"

"Trust me I know because I, and my daughter, Al's mother, are both guilty of doing the same thing." Ava laughed. "Let me ease your mind by telling you what I see."

"I'd like that, because my emotions and thoughts are all over the place."

"Well Mary, I saw the way my grandson came to your defense, but then that is Alec, he has the heart of a protector. It's why he dwindled into helplessness so long after his brother died--"

"I know. I couldn't believe he felt guilty for being alive, while his brother had died in the war. I--" Mary's mouth slammed shut when she saw the surprise on Ava's face. "I'm sorry..."

"No," Ava waved a hand at her, her hazel eyes shiny with tears. "I...I'm actually happy because I always suspected as much, but none of us could get Al to even talk about his brother."

"Now I really feel bad for saying anything, because Alec may have preferred I kept his confidence to myself," Mary fretted.

Ava reached out and patted her shoulders. "Then it will be our little secret. This also confirms what I am seeing between you two."

Mary shook her head. A blush of heat swept of the sides of her neck.

"Tis true. When you aren't looking at Alec, his eyes follow your movements and there is this unconscious grin around his mouth. He is falling in love with you Mary if he hasn't already, and I for one could not be more pleased. Al needs a nice girl such as yourself that can get to know and accept him for who he is, not this publicity hound that we see on television and such."

"Yeah, I'm learning that that man and the one I'm coming to know are not the same."

"I've seen him in newspapers with one girl after another and not one of them was his type. Al has always had a thing for the big girls, like his Mummo and Mama. We are of sturdy European peasant stock and I never understood why he continuously insisted on dating those stick figured women!"

Mary was relieved to see the moment of sadness gone from the elderly woman's face. Her

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eyes alight with the warmth of earlier as she continued chatting about Alec. Mary was delighted she had someone to share her feelings with. Most of all she liked Alec's grandmother immensely.

"When Alec introduced you to them did you have this need to fatten them up for his sake?" Mary teasingly asked, not expecting the answer she received.

"Sweetheart, Al doesn't mind parading those women around in public, but he would never bring any of them around his family unless he was serious. Especially around me! He knows I will bluntly speak my mind in regards to his choices." Ava's double chin lifted a notch. "No, no, he never bring them gold-diggers around me," she huffed.

"You're saying you haven't met not one of the women Alec has been linked to "seriously" be dating?" Mary chin dropped in disbelief. "Not even, Erica Fontaine? I believe he planned on proposing to her, this holiday."

"Miss Fontaine?" She touched a finger to her chin in thought. "Hmm...I believe my daughter, Nessa, Alec's mother, has met her. She didn't care much for her from my understanding. She said the woman didn't seem to have a sincere bone in her body, but no, she hasn't been in this house."

"So, you're saying, none of the other assistants that had accompanied him during the week before the family arrived has visited--"

Mary halted, seeing how, Ava was already shaking her head. Stunned by the implications of what Ava was saying she stared in silence at Alec's grandmother. Her hair white and thinning with age was sprayed into a becoming short matronly style off her broad brow, tapering along her neckline. If she had to choose someone that Alec's grandmother resembled, she would have to say Barbara Bush, only shorter. It was her expressive eyes that drew one's attention the most.

Mary shook off her musings as she realized Ava was speaking to her. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"Dear, I said *you* are the only woman that Al has brought to his childhood home to meet me." Ava patted her cheek and released a throaty snort. "I see that stunned look on your face. You might as well get use to the idea that my grandson is in love with you, even if he may not realize it yet. With that said, I need a you to do me a favor."

"If I can," Mary said, still numb by the knowledge that Alec had been serious about everything he'd said to her. He didn't say it because he felt sorry for her. It was becoming reasonably obvious that he really did have feelings for her.

"If my Alec, does tell you he loves you, trust that it is true because no matter how active he's been I know my grandson does not throw these words around casually. I suppose what I'm

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saying is if you love him, then tell him. Life is too short to leave things to chance.”

Mary nodded in understanding.

“Also, if for some reason you can’t see yourself returning Al’s affections let him know soon, before he comes to care anymore for you than he already does.”

“I have no desire to hurt Alec,” Mary assured her.

Ave smiled at her. “Of course not, but sometimes it happens. Regardless of what you have read or heard about Al, he is an artist at heart...a sensitive soul. Though he puts up a brave front.”

“I’ve seen his art work. I was very disappointed, when I heard Rubenesque had retired, about twelve years ago. I’m still trying to get use to Alec and the artist being one and the same.”

“Forgive me dear I’m being rude again. While we wait for Al’s return, come and let’s sit at the table. We can have some warm cider while we talk.”

Mary took the offered seat at the dining table while Ava turned to the buffet to pour two mugs of cider and placing cinnamon sticks in them. The wonderful apple cinnamon aroma tantalized her senses as she took the mug from Ava.

“Thank you.” Mary sipped and savored the contents. “Hmm...delicious.”

“You’re welcome, dear.” Ava stared down into the cup she held in her hands before speaking. “Al started painting to help pay for his Ivy League education, while his younger brother, Ben, was set on going to West Point some day. Back in the early years the military was something you wished for your children, in hopes they received an education while learning a skill. Now, it means sending them to war.”

“I’m sorry that Ben died, but when Alec told me, all I could do was thank God it wasn’t Alec that had enlisted in the service,” Mary guiltily confided. “I know it’s a horrible thing to say.”

Ava patted her hand in gentle comfort. “No, I understand, dear and I’m happy that Al has someone like you that he can discuss these things--”

“What things?” Alec asked entering the dining room.

Mary looked up from her cup. She wondered if she would ever get use to the way, her body and heart reacted to him.

“None of your business. Me and Mary are talking girl talk.” Ava winked at Mary and she smile back, thankful for the save, she needed time to think about everything she and Ava had discussed. Was she ready to tell him what he meant to her and throw all her doubts to the wind?

Yes, she told herself, she was ready. Maybe once they returned to the Ranch she would be honest with him and they would be alone with no interruptions or distractions.

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“So, beautiful, you talking about me, huh?” Alec turned his green gaze on her and she felt the heat rising to her face.

“I don’t know why you would think that,” Mary chuckled nervously.

“Well, for one, the look you had on your face when you looked at me. Secondly, your ears are turning red,” he winked and sat down beside her. “So give it up? You tell Mummo, I’m the man of your dreams?”

“On that note, I think I will bake the biscuits so we can have breakfast. It looks like it just going to be family this morning so how about we eat at the table in the kitchen. Mary there is a beautiful view of the river that you can see from the kitchen window. Ava grunted and arose from the table.

“That sounds wonderful, I will help you.” Mary moved to stand and Alec grabbed her arm to halt her from moving.

“We’ll be there in a minute, Mummo.” Alec said, not removing his searching eyes from Mary’s face.

Ava chuckled. “You children, take your time, I’m sure there isn’t anything that can’t keep.”

Alec waited for his grandmother to leave the room and said, “Are you okay? I’m so sorry that bastard said those things about you.”

“I’m fine, Alec. I was a military brat. We lived in places that I wasn’t always welcomed and I learned early in my life to develop a thick skin.” She saw the concern etched in his brow and she touched his face. “Trust me I’ve heard worse. Just promise me that no matter what you may hear being said, that you won’t react with violence. It’s never the answer.

”I apologize, Mary, but it pisses me off that there are still simple minded people in the year 2007!” Alec argued.

“I agree.” She smiled her fingers moving from his cheek to cup his chin. “So honestly, do you really care what he has to say about us? He’s a stranger, so why fight over it?”

Smiling Alec dipped his head closer to hers and asked softly, “Is there an *us*?”

Heat skittered down her spine and her breath became short puffs. As usual his nearness played havoc with her senses. She bent her head to hide the turmoil of her thoughts. *Should she go ahead and tell him she loved him now?*

He placed a finger beneath her chin and raised her face until she was staring into his eyes. “Talk to me, sweetheart. Am I foolish to hope that you would want me?”

Mary could tell herself that he was a womanizer and there was no way he could truly want to be in a serious relationship with her, but deep down she realized his actions of late had spoke volumes. He’s told her about his feelings over his brother’s death, he told her about his secret

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life as the artist Marceau Rubenesque, he protected her from that crude man. Last but not least he brought her here to meet someone that is obviously very important to him. How could she not love such a man?

“No, you’re not being foolish.” Mary rushed out the words before she had the chance to talk herself out of it. Now that the answer hung in the air between them, she couldn’t ever take it back.

He grasped her shoulders and bent even closer to her so that his nose nuzzled one side of hers, before moving to whisper in her ear, “So it’s okay if I foolishly lose my heart to you, sweet Mary?”

His voice, deep and sensual, sent a ripple of awareness through her. His scent mingled with the appetizing smells from the kitchen seeped into her senses. His eyes clung to hers, studying her face and waiting.

“Yes, it’s okay, because I believe we’re both being foolish and yes, I want you to lose your heart to me,” she replied over her fragile, beating heart.

“Are you still frightened?” He asked.

“Yes. You?”

“Hell, yeah.” He said with staid calmness.

“Then, we’ll take it one day at a time. Agreed?”

“Agreed. Does this mean I now have the right to touch you and kiss you when I want?”

Mary could feel Alec’s uneven breathing on her cheek, as he moistened his lips. Her eyelashes fluttered close as his tongue traced the soft fullness of her lips before she felt the heady sensation of his mouth against her mouth.

His glorious mouth over hers, devouring all that she offered, shocked by her own eager response she parted her lips leaning into his strong body as he wrapped his arms around her.

They heard a clatter in the kitchen and Mummo cursing softly and regretfully parted, laughing.

“I think we better get in there, your grandmother is probably starving waiting on us.”

“I’m starving too, but not for food.” Alec murmured before recapturing her lips for a more demanding kiss.

For a moment longer Mary gave in to her desires with reckless abandonment before gaining her senses once more and put her hand against his chest, pushing lightly.

“Alec, there will be time for this later. Whatever she has prepared smells delicious and you forgot I was so busy working I skipped lunch and dinner yesterday.”

“Mmm, okay” he conceded. Too easily she thought until his next words. “Except, maybe

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we should skip the festivities in the park and head back home so we can do some more of this in private.”

“Alec Mercer, are you denying me the opportunity to bake cookies with Mummo and see the live nativity scene?”

His long fingers tugged her ponytails. “Would you consider me a bad guy if I said, yes?”

“Yes,” she bit her inner lip to keep from grinning like an idiot because she was deliriously happy and would like nothing better then to go back to the ranch and spend the night in Alec’s arms. Nevertheless, if it hadn’t been for his grandmother she would have continued wallowing in self-doubt. At the very least, she owed her at least one day of their company.

Alec released a resounding sigh. “I know that look, your mind is already made up.”

“Yup.”

He took her hand in his and they walked into the kitchen together.

The rest of the morning went by quickly after a hearty breakfast of homemade sourdough biscuits, strawberry canned preserves, fried salmon patties, soft scrambled eggs, and hash browns with onions.

After breakfast Mummo ushered Alec out the door with a grocery list of items to pick up along with Mary’s list of necessities to get her through the night. Once Alec returned Mummo sent him on another errand to take the decorations to the square and help the “men-folk”.

With a long baleful look at her, Mary watched Alec sulk his way out of the kitchen.

“Now we can talk freely, it’s just us ladies, yah?”

Mary chuckled and nodded.

A few hours later Mary and Mummo bagged the first two batches of cookies chatting as if they were lifelong friends. Mary was contented listening to Mummo’s endless narratives of Alec’s many youthful adventures. Apparently he, Ben and Ally had fancied themselves superheroes. A broken arm, two sprang ankles, and a cracked rib later the three potential superheroes realized there was no way to emulate these characters in the comic books unless you were from another planet.

The more Mary heard the more she laughed, and the more she laughed deeper she fell in love with the boy Alec had been and the man he’d become. There was so much about him that the world didn’t know. Private charity contributions of his time and money alone, was enough to cancel out the persona the media had painted of him. She also understood why he was the type of man that didn’t feel the need to defend or justify his actions. Her secret admiration for the object of her desire had grown ten-fold in the last hours alone with Mummo.

By the time Alec returned, Mary was in the kitchen putting away the last of the dried dishes

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while Mummo went to change clothing. With a deep sigh and a half smile on her lips she reached behind her to undo the apron.

"Here let me get that for you," Alec said. He brushed aside her hands and released the knot from her apron, helping her guide the bib over her head. He folded the apron and moved to place it on the wooden island in the center of the kitchen. "Did you miss me?"

Mary was brimming with thoughts of Alec dancing in her head. Now that she accepted her love for him, she wondered how she could have thought she could live the rest of her life without him? They had been apart most of the afternoon and she hungered to see his smile, look into his eyes and kiss his lips.

Mummo filled her head with so much wonderful information about this man that her heart was fit to bust and she was crushing big time. He was everything she wanted and so much more than she had expected to ever find in her life. Where did she begin to thank him for not giving up on her?

Without further delay Mary rushed to Alec filling his empty arms with her needy body. For once she took the initiative and eased a hand behind his neck forcing him to bend towards her so she could claim his lips with her own. He gasped his pleasant surprise against her mouth as his hands currently resting on her shoulders moved to roam her body, caressing and molding her closer to him at the same time.

Mary felt blessed to be able to touch and hold Alec this way, there was something surreal about the moment and she expected to wake up from a dream to find none of today real.

Yet, Alec's mouth had been open and ready when she possessed it. His hands adoring her flesh was real. Everywhere she touched she found muscles and ridges of hardness, assuring her that he was really there in her arms. Her fingertips had grown overly sensitive from her foray along his body, there was no mistaken the reality of her erect nipples and pulsing clitoris.

Alec took hold of one of her hands and tugged and sucked one of her fingers in his mouth. She bit down on her bottom lip to keep from crying out as moisture pooled and seeped into the crotch of her panties. She needed him.

"Oh God, w have to stop," she mumbled breathlessly leaning her face into his chest as she swayed with heady emotions. "I feel as if I'm burning from the inside out."

"Please," Alec moaned palming her breast and rubbing his hand back and forth against her nipple. "More...more."

Mary groaned and disengaged herself from his hands. "Nope, I need to pull myself together, we are about to visit a church and I got all these sinful thoughts in my head."

"Tell me," Alec encouraged. A grin spread his mouth wide, his lips a blush color from her

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heated kisses. “Tell me, sweet virginal Mary, what sinful thoughts could you possibly be having? Better yet, show me.”

She covered her lips with one hand to stave her girlish giggles as she swatted at his hands with the other. “Come on, I’m serious.” He pulled her against him and grabbed both her ass cheeks with his hands. Mary could feel his hard erection against her. Her eyes grew big as saucers as she glimpsed his grandmother coming from the sitting room area towards the dining room. “Stop it Alec, here comes Mummo.”

“Don’t mind me.” Mummo called from the dining room before entering the kitchen with a knowing grin.

Alec turned and moved Mary to stand in front of him. His face still flushed from their heated encounter.

“Al, I don’t think I saw that look on your face since I caught you with your hand in the cookie jar when you were six.” Mummo laughed. “I don’t think this kitchen has seen such happy activity since your grandpapa was alive. Mercy, those were some good days.”

“Mummo,” Alec grimaced.

Mary laughed at his embarrassment and found him adorable. That is, if such a word could be used for a grown man.

“How do you think your Mamma got here? Or you?” Mummo shook her white head and clucked her tongue. “Why do young people think they have the market cornered on sex?”

“Mummo, it’s not that I don’t know. I just don’t want to know the details or even think about it, for goodness sake,” Alec grimaced.

“Well, it does a grandmother good to see her grandson laughing and happy.” She reached up and tugged on Alec’s ear. “Mary, his mother and I have spent many Christmases wishing for Alec to find someone special and settle down. I think finally this Christmas we’ve gotten our wish.”

“Thank you, Mummo.” Mary gushed. It was as close to an approval to their dating that one could get and it meant a lot to her coming from this woman. She just hoped her parents and his would feel the same way.

“Mummo, if your prayers brought Mary to me, then pray that I can keep her by my side.” Alec placed a tender kiss to the aging woman’s weathered cheek.

“You do right by her Al and you shouldn’t have any problems,” she assured him. “Now, my babies let’s get all this stuff over to the church. I’ve never been late since I’ve been attending and I’m not starting now,” Mummo announced. She patted and squeezed both Mary’s and Alec’s hand as she passed between them.

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The party of three packed up all their baked goods and headed to church to drop off everything in the church kitchen. Ava opted to stay at the church to help with preparations and urged Alec to walk Mary over to the square to witness the sunset lighting of the lantern and hear the choir sing.

As they found a comfortable spot in the park amongst many bystanders, Alec drew Mary in front of him and wrapped his arms around shielding her the best he could from the chilly evening air.

Mary hummed and sung along with the choir, she always had a deep love for Christmas songs and usually went caroling to the local nursing homes with a group of volunteers from the office.

Her body remained on a low burn as Alec nuzzled his mouth against her ear, “You have a lovely voice. Are you enjoying yourself?”

“Very much so,” she answered, tilting her head to smile up at him. She returned her attention to the singers.

“I can see that Mummo adores you as much as I do.”

His deep husky voice wrapped around her like a warm blanket. She found herself studying his profile in the softly lit surroundings.

“I feel as if I’ve known her all my life,” she admitted. “She’s made me feel very welcomed and our conversation earlier helped me to stop wasting time on doubts and fears.”

“Then I must get Mummo an awesome Christmas gift. It seems I owe her a lot if she is the reason for this change.”

“Isn’t that what you hoped for? I assumed that’s why you brought me here to meet her. You knew I would know that you were serious about me once I met your grandmother.” She tilted her head back to accept his kiss, thoroughly enjoying the feeling of not celebrating another holiday without love.

He broke away to stare down into her face. “I didn’t know, Mary,” Alec corrected. “I hoped.”

Before, she could only imagine what it would be like to share her love for the holidays with someone other than family and friends. Now that she knew how it felt to be completely happy and alive, she had no intentions of spending the rest of her life alone. How could she have ever thought that God gave her an illness because he meant for her to spend the rest of her life alone doing good deeds for others?

Mary made a mental note to never allow her disease to take away her chance at living the best possible life she could. Like other women, she dreamed of marriage and a family of her own

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and now Alec was giving her a chance to dream of the possibility that it could happen.

“What is that smile all about?” Alec leaned back to get a better look at her, a soft closed mouth smile on his face.

“I was just making a few Christmas wishes of my own, since this seems to be the year for them.” Mary grinned at him.

For a long minute, they looked into each other’s eyes, and some strong, basic emotion passed between them. Mary didn’t look away, she couldn’t if she wanted to, because the desire she saw there matched her own. As if a magnet was drawing him he lowered his head and attacked her lips with his own.

With a resigned sigh she turned in his arms so that he could crush her even closer to deepen the kiss. She leaned into him opening wider for his tongue. A deep moan of pleasure, rumbled from her throat and Mary gave in to the exquisite erotic sensations.

Neither of them no longer heard the singing around them, just the pounding of hearts beating, moaning and smacking of lips that seemed extremely loud to their own ears. Nothing else mattered.

Mary felt her feet leave the ground as if she was floating, as Alec held her tightly against his body, arching back so that there was no questioning his obvious desire to be with her...in her. As her lips clung to his, she moved her hands to the ebony depths of his hair and tangled her fingers in its silken softness.

Alec was the first to regain hold of his senses, thank God, because her brain was completely useless. “Sweetness, I think we are gaining an audience here,” he nodded his head down at a cherub faced little girl of about five staring up at them with opened mouth curiosity.

Mary smiled at the little girl and eased her hold on Alec, allowing him to slowly glide her body against his as her feet return to the snow covered ground.

“Oh, how embarrassing,” she mumbled hiding her face into the thickness of his coat.

“Mummo, will be at the church for at least another two hours. What say we move this to the house? I want to be with you so bad I’m physically hurting.”

At the sound of desperation in Alec’s voice, her body tightened and responded in need. She didn’t want to wait any longer. “I want to be with you too, Alec”

“Then, why are we still standing here?” Alec laced her fingers with his and started a hasty stroll down the block towards the house.

“Alec, wait.” Mary called out. Her face flushed from the pace he set and she heavily breathed in and blew out the cool evening air.

“Oh, damn, sorry.” Alec came to halt. “I was walking to fast for you, wasn’t I?”

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“No, it’s just I changed my mind, I don’t want to go back to Mummo’s house.”

Disappointment entered his expression and he groaned. “Mary, you’re killing me here. I promise I won’t do any more than you want to do. Just let me hold you and spend some time alone with you.” He cupped her full face. “Allow me to kiss you until my body goes numb.”

He dipped his head and kissed her to push his point. Mary accepted his kiss and realized he was distracting her again, as he walked her backwards, towards the direction of the house. She broke the kiss shaking her head, he was good at this, maybe too good. Still for her sake having a man that was an experienced lover wasn’t going to be a bad thing.

“Alec...Alec, look here. No, not at the breasts, here...at these two fingers in front of my face...focus...focus...that’s it,” Mary snorted on a laugh. “I need you to get your mind out of your crotch long enough to listen to me.”

Alec laughed aloud and shook his head. “Okay, now that you got my full attention, go ahead. I promise to try and keep my hands to myself for at least three minutes.”

“I only need one to say this,” she came up on her tiptoes and kissed the side of his neck.

“Damn,” he blew out a long breath of air. “Mary if you keep doing stuff like that I can’t keep my promises. You know I have no problems picking your ass up and carrying you across the street,” he warned.

“Okay...okay,” she laughed with open joy. “I want to be with you, but if we’re going to do this, I don’t want to make love to you in your grandmother’s house. That would be too disrespectful to your grandmother.”

“My God, are you for real?” Alec shook his head and beamed. “You are so adorable, I don’t know whether to kiss you silly, or worship you for being such a rare jewel.”

“How about both. You can kiss me silly and then worship me once you have me naked.” She wiggled her eyebrows at him and in her most seductive voice said, “If you can find a hotel, you can unwrap *me* for Christmas.”

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Alec let out a whoop and made his way towards the first place he came to that had an available sign. Mary waited outside, too embarrassed to go inside with him. She felt like everyone was looking at them and knew what they were about to do. It wasn't true of course, just her crazy nervous thoughts.

Alec came out of the office with key in hand. They made their way to their assigned room pausing for his hungry kisses and her anxious laughter.

Mary hadn't expected Alec to unlock the door, then turn to her and lift her off her feet carrying her across the threshold, she instantly remembered something she told her mother years ago, "I will marry the man that can lift my fat ass and carry it over the threshold." *I found him, mom!*

They stood just beyond the threshold when Alec lowered her to her feet and kicked closed the door. Neither noticed the contents of the room or cared about the dim lighting coming from the bathroom. They hurriedly peeled off each other's coats, gloves, and scarves. Alec removed her ponytail holders and her hair fell to her shoulders.

"I love your hair." He burrowed his fingers in its thick silky depths to hold her face in place. He tilted his head to the side and hers the other, slashing his mouth over hers while moaning his appreciation.

Alec reached down and lifted the peach cashmere sweater over her head, they giggled as her glasses came off with it. Mary hurriedly removed them from the entangled sweater and placed them on the wooden stand beside the bed.

Alec eyes feasted on the sight before him, Mary in her jeans, boots, and a lacy cream-colored bra. Her wonderful large breasts jiggled in the bra cups as she tugged his black sweater over his head. Momentarily everything was hidden from his view and he brushed aside her hands and made short work of removing the sweater and the white t-shirt beneath.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" Mary blushing looked away sweeping her hair behind her ears.

"I'm sorry," he chuckled. "You have the most beautiful eyes. I feel as if I could drown in

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their dark pools. Why do you hide them behind glasses?" He cupped her face as if he was truly taking all of her in for the first time.

"I'm not hiding, I just want to be able to see," she grinned.

"You know contacts are a wonder these days."

"Yes, but I have astigmatisms and I can only wear them for a short time or I get a headache. What?" She shook her head at his look of doubt. "I have contacts also, but I read all the time and wear them only for special occasions. Do you really want to waste the little time we have discussing my eyewear?"

"No, you're beautiful, with or without your glasses," he mumbled against her lips as she worked at his belt buckle.

"Oh, good answer, Mr. Mercer."

"Damn, you called me "Mister Mercer". You know what that means," he said in a playfully threatening voice.

"No, what?" She bent her head and placed a moist tender kiss to his naked, lightly hair-covered chest.

Alec gasped and closed his eyes from the wonderful sensation of having Mary's lips on him. She testily licked one of his nipples and he bit down on the back of his teeth willing himself to be patient and not give into the need to rush things, just because its been awhile since he made love to a woman.

She pulled back to look up into his face. "You were saying?" She arched an eyebrow in question.

"Saying? What was I saying?" Alec frowned in confusion. "Oh, I remember. You're fired, Ms. Christmas."

"Mmm, good. I didn't want to be another cliché around the office for sleeping with my boss anyway," she teased.

He stepped forward against Mary until the back of her legs hit the bed and they laughingly fell onto the mattress.

"Whoa Alec, I thought you were a 007 in the bedroom. A skilled, smooth kind of lover, especially if the rumors are true about you."

Alec lifted his head from the wet tongue trail he was making down the side of her neck to her shoulder pulling her bra strap with him. "Don't believe everything you hear, but in this case they all are true." He wiggled his eyebrows at her. "Still, you try being suave, while having a raging *hard-on* making it damn near impossible to think coherently."

"Then by all means, ignore my protest and go back to kissing me," Mary commanded.

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“My pleasure,” he murmured settling his lips until they felt perfect against hers and urged her mouth wider so his tongue could enter.

Mary heard a low moaning sound of pleasure in his throat as she sucked on his tongue. Her hands swept over his naked back, cupping the belt loops of his jeans to hold onto something as intense neediness continue to build inside her.

As he shifted, her jean clad thighs spread wider to accommodate him as his hips made the circular motion of lovemaking against her. Her heart raced and she felt a fear of the unknown, but she was sure she wanted her first time to be with him.

“Oh.” She cried out as her breast sprang free, she looked at him with amazement. She hadn’t even felt his fingers graze her when he unsnapped the back snap of her bra. “You are good.”

He grinned. “You haven’t seen anything, yet.”

Mary laughter died on a moan of pleasure-pain as he alternately kissed, caressed, and sucked her nipples. She loved the way he seemed to adore her with his fingertips. Each stroke hinted at his artistic side. She felt as if his fingers were sculpting and shaping her breast molding them perfectly to his hands.

“I knew you would be exquisite, I just didn’t realize how much” his voice rasped. “You must let me paint your portrait, Mary.” He took a portion of her breast along with nipple and areola, and tugged deeply.

Mary cried out and arched against him flailing from side to side, digging her nails into his shoulders. She felt the tugging all the way to her vagina.

“Please, Alec,” she whimpered. She wasn’t sure what she was begging for. She just knew she wouldn’t be able to take the pressure building up in the pit of her stomach much longer without some sort of relief.

When she felt his fingers at the waist she reached down to help him. There was no time to dwell on the fact that she was about to get completely naked for the first time in front of a man. She’d gotten close a couple of times and failed to go any further. This time she knew she was going all the way, for Alec didn’t look at her in repulsion. Looking at his face as he looked at her made her feel like the most desired woman in the entire world.

She closed her eyes as he finished undressing her. Her boots thudded to the floor followed by her jeans and panties.

“Give me a moment,” he said and stood, quickly toeing off his shoes, before shuffling down his jeans and boxer-briefs, kicking them aside. “Open you eyes, Mary I want you to get accustomed to seeing me this way. There will be no shame or embarrassment in our bedroom. It

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will be the one place we shed all pretense, fears and worries and be ourselves.”

She came up on her elbows as he stood proudly before her. She admired the security he had in his skin. It was powerful and sexy. Mary appreciated the care he took in his body. He was lean and muscular, a runner’s body. His penis was standing proud reaching towards his navel, trails of bluish-green veins protruding its length. It was intimidating in some ways, but she couldn’t be more please. Alec’s body was a work of art. It was everything she imagined and more. There was nothing about this man she found lacking, not even the grafting scars running from the side of his calf and up his thigh took away from his sexual appeal.

“You are so...*fine*,” she praised him with a broad smile.

He smiled his welcome moving to join her on the bed his heavy leg pinning her to the bed as he eased her onto her back. Mary welcomed the weight and feel of his naked heated flesh against hers. The spray of silky hair on his chest tickled the nipple of the breast pressed against him in such a delicious way.

The feel of his muscular arm under the tracing of her fingertips made her feel vulnerable and small in comparison.

Alec’s fingers grazed the contours of her face as if he was forever emblazing it into his memory. “I can’t believe you felt you had to keep your body hidden, because of these scars.” He nuzzled the one beneath her right arm where she had had skin grafted from her outer thigh. “You are so lovely, the soft fullness of your body, the taste...the smell of you, so gloriously delicious. I don’t see anything but your perfection, Mary. Thank you for allowing me to be your first.”

“I’m glad you’re going to be my first,” she managed to speak, her voice cracking with emotions. No man had ever gloried in her body as Alec was doing. If anything it made her love him even more.

Hopefully you will be my last. She spoke the words in her head she could not say aloud. She didn’t want to jinx any possibility of a future with Alec, by making him think she expected more than what they’d already shared.

Mary tensed and he must have sensed it. He lifted his dark head and looked in her eyes.

“Sweetheart, if I do anything to make you uncomfortable, or anything that you enjoy the most,” he kissed the corners of her mouth. “Tell me.”

Mary didn’t know how she was supposed to speak another word. Alec was sweeping a wide tongue over her nipples, beneath her breast and along her ribcage. She finally managed a stoic nod, while gasping. Her body was already addicted to his hot searching mouth. She didn’t want him to ever stop.

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Tears blinded her vision. The gentle way he adored her brought forth emotions she didn't know she possessed. He seemed to purposely seek out and place loving kisses to the many scars left by her Hidradenitis. Alec was making it clear that her scars were as much a part of her body as her breast and vagina.

"Oh Alec," she cried. Her heart brimmed with love for this man to the point it was painful.

His tongue, moist and hot, sought out her secret concaves finding sensitive spots she never imagined existed. Mary only imagined what it would feel like to look down and see a man's head nestled between her thick thighs. Yet, this sensation was not one that could imagine. It was agonizing ecstasy in its purist basic form.

Her breathing came out rough and ragged while shaky fingers combed through the silky-smoothness of his dark hair and scraped her nails across his scalp. Alec's hands were kneading her stomach, caressing the curve of her hip, cupping her ass cheeks, squeezing briefly before guiding and shouldering her thighs over his shoulders. For a moment she tensed thinking the heaviness of her legs would be too much for him, but his grip on her assured her that he was in complete control and she submitted to the sensations clamoring through her trembling flesh.

Mary jerked and gasped as pleasurable pain shot through her lower extremities. The growing sensitivity of her clitoris almost became unbearable as he suckled and manipulated it with the hotness of his mouth.

She arched her hips as he held her refusing to allow her thighs to drop or close when it became unbearable. Alec was like a man starving, lifting her thigh up to receive the full stroking of his long tongue and for Mary his hunger for her was exhausting. She didn't believe she could have so many orgasms in a row. Her limit from masturbating with her fingers was two and then numbness usually set in. Her ability to be multi-orgasmic was pleasantly unexpected. Alec's tongue worked miracles, bringing forth a womanly gratification she never known. At this point he could do anything to her and she would be helpless to stop him. She was his.

"Alec...ah...ah...no more...no more!" Mary cried out, hot tears falling down the side of her face. She struggled with her breathing, fleetingly wondering if people could die from too much pleasure. She could feel her wet juices flowing between the crack of her ass as her body trembled against the waves of another orgasm.

His deep chuckle brought her back to consciousness and she opened her eyes to find him leaning over her with a big beautiful smile, his lips red and full from the ultimate kiss he shared with her.

"My God woman, you taste wonderful! *Sweet*, just like I imagined." He dipped his head and placed a tender kiss to her lips before pulling back to look at her once more to say, "I would

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never need another meal if I could live down there between your legs.”

She flushed in embarrassment tasting herself on his mouth. “No you couldn’t, because if you touched my clitoris one more time, I would have died. Alec--” Mary hesitated to say it. Never had she thought she would be in a hotel room having this conversation with a man. Not just any man, but the man she has secretly coveted for years. This was somewhat of a surreal moment for her.

“What is it, sweetheart?” He encouraged softly.

“I want to know what it feels like to have you inside me,” Mary rushed out. “I know I seemed hesitant about losing my virginity to you at first, but I’m sure, that I want it to be you, no matter what.”

“So do I, baby.” His brow puckered in concern. “Why would you think otherwise?”

“Well,” she blushed once more. “After going down *there*, like that, I thought it was because you were trying to avoid taking my virginity.”

Alec grinned and threw his head back in laughter. “Mary, you are such a joy. I only wish I could be as magnanimous as you think I am. Trust me my love, this was not my intent. I tasted your potent juices for purely selfish reasons. My desire to lick your clitoris while sticking my tongue in your wet pussy, and making you scream my name was very premeditated.”

Mary released girlish giggles as he lowered his head and pretended to bite her throat like a vampire, hitting her ticklish spots only to end his playfulness lovingly nibbling the side of her neck and kiss the spot before lifting his head once more.

“Before we continue, we must discuss something important,” he stated, his deep voice taking on a serious tone.

Mary frowned her concern.

“I’m tested every six months and usually wear protection, so if you aren’t on any form of birth control--”

“Don’t worry, I take birth control pills to regulate my periods.” She lifted a hand and touched his face. She was touched that he would take the time out to bring up a subject she wasn’t sure how to approach without ruining the moment. “It’s okay, I’ve been on them long enough to not feel concerned about getting pregnant.”

“Still, I’m going to use a condom, because you shouldn’t have to take my word on such an important matter as my being tested or not,” he assured her. “When we return to Seattle I will show you my latest test results, or get tested again, if you wish. Mary, I want you to know that once you entrust your body to me I will take care of it, as well as my own and I know you have health concerns beyond the normal, with your illness.”

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“Alec,” she whispered and silently thanked God for this man.

“Sweetheart, I know all of this is somewhat new to you and you’ve waited a long time to go into this blindly like some grappling naive teenager, and I’m too experienced to let you.” Alec brought her hand up to his lips. “Once you take this step there is much responsibility that comes with being active sexually, because I assure you there is no turning back once you’ve taken this life altering step.”

She nodded her understanding saying, “Thank you for your concern Alec. It means a lot to me, that you are looking after me. I did have a lot of questions but I thought asking would spoil the mood. I didn’t want to seem stupid about such things, especially at my age,” Mary admitted.

“If we can be lovers, Mary, we can discuss these intimate matters openly otherwise you shouldn’t be in this bed with me. There are things you need to look out for afterwards...”

“Such as?”

“Such as, any feminine problems afterwards. I don’t know if you are aware of the possibility, but some women find that they are allergic to latex condoms, so I use non-latex just in case,” he assured her.

“Okay,” Mary said and asked, “Alec, are you also giving me time, to change my mind about doing this? Are you sure you aren’t having second thought? I know you said you didn’t want the responsibility--”

She was surprised to see his handsome features hardened with intensity. “Mary, I want you so bad now, I think my balls are turning blue from lack of release. But you’re right. I do feel being your first is a big responsibility and in my head I’m thinking, you can only have one *first time*. I can barely remember mine it was such a awkward blur with an older woman.” He shook his head. “Baby, I want you to be sure, it’s the right time and that you’re giving this precious gift to the right person.”

Mary sat up and he came up beside her. She reached out and roamed a hand across his mussed hair. Her eyes searching his face noting his concern was genuine. “Alec, this moment so far as been so much more the I could hope for. Being here with you and you being my first is the only thing I know I’m sure about, I’ve known it from the moment I saw you that I wanted you.”

His eyes grew wide, his surprise apparent on his face.

“I don’t know what will happen between us afterwards and I don’t want to think about it. I just want to make the best of this moment, being here with you, like this. I want to touch you, taste you as you’ve tasted me, and keep this memory for the rest of my days.”

She smiled as he released a long shivering sigh. The relief showed bright on his face and he grinned foolishly at her. His consideration to her welfare was one of the reasons Mary loved him.

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No man could have a reputation as a lover without being a considerate one. She realized something others didn't. Women may have slept with him easily because he was wealthy, but it wasn't the money that made them want to hold on to him when he was pushing them away. He was a good man with lots of love to give. Each of those women knew it, and wanted to be the *one* woman that could seize his heart forever.

She watched in curious anticipation as Alec moved to sit on the edge of the bed. He lifted his pants off the floor retrieving a condom from his wallet and turned to look at her a passionate light flaming in his stormy green eyes. "Would you like to do the honors or save it for another time?"

Mary shook her head, "My hands are shaking so bad, I think I will make a mess of things," she laughed nervously. Her eyes going back to his beautiful erection as he tore open the pack with his teeth and placed the condom on it's weeping tip before rolling the condom down to encase him. "Can I touch it?"

"Please do," he managed while looking her over seductively.

Mary reached out and ran a finger along the length of his penis and it moved. She released a surprised squeal and drew back her hand in laughter.

Alec laughed with her, taking her hand in his he guided it back down between his legs and guided her fingers. His voice was tight with need when he said, "I like to be held like this." He squeezed her hand around him and gasped, "With that much pressure. Now move your hand like this. That's it."

Mary stroked him, taking her queue from his moans and heavy breathing. Just looking at his face turned her on, and the aroma of musky arousal permeated her nostrils, she wasn't sure if it was him, her, or the both of them. A moisture grew hot and heavy between her thighs as she sat on her legs beside him, her breast pressed against his side.

She separated her knees to accommodate his wondering hand that started with massaging her round butt cheeks before dipping in the crack and etching downward to find her wet slick labia. Mary bit her bottom lip and moan, moving against his hand, while stoking him the way he liked it. She didn't miss his open examination and approval of her hand on his cock.

His fingers were caressing her wetness until she felt the tension building once more. He matched the pace of her stroking and when he increased speed, so did she while grinding against his trusting fingers.

"Now," she panted frantically. "I want you inside me...now."

Releasing him, his hand dropped from her and she lifted it and suckled the fingers that had been inside her into her mouth. Slowly she eased back to rest against the stacked pillows on the

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bed drawing him to her. Alec came willingly, settling himself between her thighs, his face contorted in pleasure as she tugged on his finger, sucking, long and hard.

“You’re getting the seducing part down,” he croaked.

She chuckled from her throat because her mouth was busy making love to the hand that had given her intense pleasure.

He tugged his finger from her mouth and she released it with a loud ‘pop’ and a wet mouth grin.

Happiness filled her as he spoke loving erotic words in her ear with wet kisses leaving a trail to her lips. His tongue traced the soft fullness of her mouth. It sent new spirals of ecstasy through her.

His lips brushed against hers as he spoke, “My sweet Mary, if you could only see yourself through my eyes as this moment. You are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

For the moment, she believed it. She felt beautiful and more alive than she had her entire life. He kissed the pulsing hollow at the base of her throat drawing forth a hoarse moan. Burying her face in his neck, she panted a kiss there and sucked leaving her mark of passion upon him.

His lips captured hers, more demanding this time. Mary returned his kiss with reckless abandonment. It was a kiss that melted all fears, purging them from her soul. Mary’s knees spread wider and she bucked up against the hard erection between them. She desperately wanted to feel Alec inside her. She knew only he could douse the inferno he had created in her body. It no longer felt like it was hers to control.

Taking his cock in hand, he settled himself her entrance easing the head in. She tensed as she felt him come up against her barrier before he pushed his way through and plunged deeply into her.

Mary cried out, her nails biting into his shoulders as a burning sensation followed by a pressured of impossible fullness invaded her body. She was thankful he held himself up on his arms to keep his slender hips still. She needed a moment to adjust to the length and girth of his cock buried inside her vaginal canal.

“Damn, woman, you feel so fucking good.” He grunted. “I don’t know if I can hold this erection for my usual bout this first time. It’s been awhile and I feel as if I’m about to explode.”

“Are you okay?” She asked temporarily alarmed by the redness of his face. A vein was visibly pumping in his forehead and his shoulders were visibly tense beneath her fingers.

“Oh yeah,” he blew out a puff of air. “Whew!” He grinned and winked at her. “I got it under control and it’s I that should be asking that question. Are you okay?”

Hot tears were falling down the sides of her face and she didn’t know why, she wasn’t in any

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pain, just a dull achy throbbing from her vaginal muscles adjusting to the invasion.

Alec eased himself down to his elbows and wiped her tears away with his thumbs. "Mary, speak to me, sweetheart. Are you okay? Is it too much? I've never been with a virgin and I should have entered you a bit slower, or a little at a time." He rattled on, his voice filled with growing concern.

"Alec, baby, calm down. It's okay. I'm okay." She smiled up at him. "I've never felt so close to another person before. It's as if we've become one body and one soul. I can feel your heartbeat inside me and its one with mine. This scares the hell out of me," she admitted. Her voice sounded hoarse with emotion. "But I will kill you if you stop."

"Don't be scared, my love." Alec looked into her eyes, his eyes shimmering with emotions of his own. "Mary, I've never done this and it feels so right and fulfilling. It confirms what I already know in my heart and you don't have to say anything, but I want you to know how I feel." The Adams apple in his throat bobbed as he swallowed deeply before saying, "I love you, Mary."

"You can't say that, Alec," she cried. "Not yet, not now, because it's easy to mistake what we are feeling now for love." She placed her feet flat on the bed, causing her legs to widen more. He slid deeper inside her. Mary gasped. This was one of the happiest moments of her entire life and she didn't want to ruin the experience with words and promises he may not be able to keep. "Give me this moment, so that I won't have more expectations then you are willing to give. If we choose to be together we can discuss everything else later."

"There is no 'if', Mary. We will be together," Alec vowed through clenched teeth, his brow glistening with sweat. "You don't have to love me in return, I know it may be too soon, but you can't stop me from feeling the way I do."

"Oh, Alec."

He clasped her hips, welding their bodies together and started pumping and grinding against her. Mary matched him thrust for thrust. She wallowed in the security she felt as he whispered endearing words in her ear, telling her all the delicious things he wanted to do to her body, promising her he would win her heart.

His words alone pushed her to scream her release once more, this time bringing him with her. Alec cried out her name repeatedly as he convulsed in her arms. Mary held him tightly, biting her tongue to keep saying the words of love that sprang to her lips. She wanted to tell him when they weren't in the throws of crazy heated ecstasy. No one could possibly think clearly during a time like this, not even the great Alec Mercer.

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Alec was flat on his back in the bed, wishing he didn't have to wake Mary. He wanted to stay the entire night at the Inn so he could hold her in his arms and make love to her again and again for the remainder of the night. Never had he felt so greedy, he couldn't seem to get enough of her. When he was spent and slid out of her hotness, all he could think about was getting back in there again, feeling this way again.

Still, his Mary was her usually considerate self. She was concerned about what his Mummo would think if they stayed out all night, not to mention how worried she would be if they didn't check in with her soon. He called to tell Mummo, they would be late, and she assured him it was fine, reminding him that the church was only a short walk away from the house.

Alec knew his grandmother wasn't blind. He knew that she was aware of the significance of his bringing a woman to his family homestead to meet her. He also was sure she suspected what was happening between him and Mary tonight, but of course he wouldn't tell Mary that, she would be horrified with embarrassment.

His silly lovable Mary, he grinned in the darkness. Whatever she wanted, she would get. From this day onward her happiness was his main concern. He was in love, truly for the first time in his life and it was such a glorious surreal feeling. He felt like shouting it to the world, at the very least calling his parents and telling them. It was something they had waited along time for him to experience.

Alec brushed back her frizzed hair with his fingertips placing a loving kiss to her brow. A smug grin came to his lips. He had exhausted her. Poor thing, he hadn't meant to be so insatiable. She probably thought he was an inconsiderate oaf, but quickly after his first taste, she had become an addiction he couldn't get enough of and he didn't think he ever would. She would be sore and probably curse him like she did after that first pee, but it was okay, he would even let her beat him up as long as she didn't send him away.

A shadow of disappointment came over his current mood. He told her he loved her and she hadn't reacted as he had hoped. She had given in to her physical desire for him, but obviously, the jury was still out on whether he was worthy of her heart.

If she didn't want to hear him say he loved her right now, he doubted she would appreciate him proposing. She most likely would think he did so because she gave him her virginity. Why was falling in love so damned complicated? He supposed if he had been in love before he would have known to handle this entire situation better. He leaned down to kiss her brow again only to find her eyes open and staring at him in question? Of what he wasn't sure and he didn't trust to ask.

To be safe he opted to smile at her.

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She smiled back causing his heart to patter foolishly. He felt...hopeful.

"Hello, sleeping beauty, how are you feeling?"

Mary snuggled against him, half-on, and half-off his body releasing a row of contented sighs, her knee brushed against his soft penis. Immediately he became semi-hard and he was amazed, four erections in the matter of hours even impressed the hell out of him. What was it about this woman that made him feel insatiable?

"Sore," she admitted. "Yet, it's a good kind of soreness."

Leaning down he crooked a finger beneath her chin and tilted her face to meet his. He pressed a peck to her lips. "I'm sorry, I should have been a bit more gentle."

"No you shouldn't," she released a throaty chuckle. "I gave as good as I got and I got it just the way I wanted it. You surpass your reputation. Alec Mercer, you are a wonderful lover."

Alec grunted, "Says the woman that has no other to compare my expertise against?"

"Mmm, are you saying you want me to go out and get some more experience so I can give you a comparison study?" she quirked her right eyebrow at him in question.

Alec stiffened not seeing the humor in her statement. "Don't even tease me so, Mary. I plan on being your first, and your last for the rest of your and my life, if you'd let me."

"You know I plan on living a long time don't you?"

"I'm counting on it." His eyes twinkled lovingly.

"So, handsome, I suppose we need to get up, shower, and get back to your grandmother's. She should be back home by now and wondering what happened to us."

"I called her and told her we would be in late, but I wish you would change your mind. Mummo will understand." He outlined her face with his fingers. "I really would like to spend the night holding you just like this and I think we need to talk about what I said to you while we were making love."

He felt Mary tense and briefly closed his eyes, wondering why he had the need to rush things? If a woman had done this to him just a month ago, he would have reacted with as much tension as Mary. He told himself he would give her time and then found himself pushing her to make some kind of emotional commitment about their future. When had he become possessive and demanding? He was thinking like the women he broke things off with in the past?

He dropped his arms to his side as Mary disengaged herself from his body and sat up on the side of the bed, reaching for the slightly blood stained bathing towel he used to dry her off after he had used a wash cloth to clean off the dried blood from the first time they made love.

He watched helplessly as she place the towel around her. It only came so far, but it covered enough that his hardening cock got the message. There would be no more loving for him tonight.

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“Alec, there will be plenty of time for us to talk once we’re back at your ranch. We have the remainder of the week to get all of this sorted out.”

Mary stood and he clasped her hand in his, not giving her the chance to run off. She stopped and looked at him. “It’s only a little after eight, sweetheart. It’s still early.”

“Alec, I adore your grandmother and she promised to show me how to make a chocolate Bavarian torte before we turn in tonight. I hope to make one for Christmas.

“Mary, Mummo, makes tortes at the ranch once the family arrives. We can come back to pick her up take her to the ranch. You will have the rest of the holiday to make tortes, until you heart is contented. This is our night.”

“Alec, I will be going home next week and I will be waking up Christmas morning like I traditionally do in my old bedroom at their home,” she reminded. “Remember the deal was if my parents couldn’t make it I give you this week and spend Christmas week with them.”

He couldn’t believe she was smiling at him as if it would soften her words. It pissed him off that even though she had physically given him the most precious gift a woman can give a man it hadn’t changed her feelings for him. She still saw him as a selfish womanizer and was too sexually naïve to realize a selfish man would never had been so concerned about her needs in bed as he had.

Alec felt the pain of rejection in the pit of his stomach. How could Mary want to leave him at the end of the week? He knew what this was. It was the fates paying him back for all the women that had shed tears over his callous behavior in the past.

“I was hoping that we could wake up Christmas morning, together,” Alec mumbled.

“What?” Mary eyes widened. “I haven’t even met your parents yet and you want to sleep together with them under the same roof? I don’t know how understanding your family is, but mine aren’t, when it comes to sex. Thanks, but no thanks, Alec. I don’t want your family to see me as another one of your assistants that you’ve slept with.”

He dropped her hand. “That is not what’s going on between us, Mary and even though you want to keep giving yourself excuses to keep me at an emotional distance, and for what reason I don’t know! You can’t use my past indiscretions as an excuse.”

“Alec--”

“Nope, Mary, I’m not doing this little dance with you again,” he said angrily. “Until you start saying something I want to hear, there is nothing else to say. I told you how I feel, you don’t reciprocate and it makes me wonder if this time I’m the one being used. Trust me, I won’t beg you to return my love.” He rolled off the bed onto his feet, dragging on his jeans. He adjusted himself, tugged up his zipper and fastened his top button. “I’m not going to tell you I

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love you again until you I hear you say it."

"Alec, I do--"

He pulled his sweater over his head and tucked his underwear into his coat pocket as he picked it up. He held up a finger to Mary to quiet her next words. "Don't you dare say it now, because like you said, it will seem as if you were saying it in the heat of the moment." He combed his hands through his tumbled hair. "I hope you realize that I have feelings too before it's to fucking late!"

"Alec...wait! Don't be upset. Hey...where...where are you going," her voice rose an octave.

"I'm going to the front office to pay the hotel bill. I'll shower once we get back to Mummo's."

Even though he wanted to stay and work things out, Alec knew it was best to put some distance between them before he lost what was left of his pride by saying or doing something foolish. He walked out of the room where he had just spent the most satisfying and disappointing three and a half hours of his entire life. Looking up towards the heaven he closed his eyes and welcome the cold shower of light snow against his face.

CHAPTER TWELVE

This relationship stuff was new to Mary, but it didn't take a dating expert to tell her she'd made a mess out of one of the most beautiful moments she'd ever had, and if she wasn't sure she blew it, Alec made it clear on the silent ride back to Greenwater Ranch.

He had barely even glanced her way and by the time the SUV rolled to a halt in front of the house, she was ready to give into anything he wanted. She loved him and she was only hurting him and herself by waiting for a perfect time to say it. There wasn't such a thing as the perfect time when it came to love. What they had was precious and rare so now that she had found the one person she wanted to spend the rest of her life with she wanted to tell the world, most of all she wanted to tell the man she loved.

"Alec," she began releasing her seat belt, turning in her seat to look at him. "We need to talk. I can't take this silent treatment. Please, let's talk about this or at least listen to what I have to say."

He cut the engine and turned to look at her. His face remained stern, but what she saw in his eyes as he stared at her gave her hope. As Mummo advised her, she would tell him she loved him and trust him with her feelings.

"Mary, I--what the hell?" His gaze drifted towards the front porch beyond her shoulder.

Mary turned and gasped as a stunningly beautiful woman stood at the top of the steps, wrapped in a white fur coat. Her auburn hair swept up in a sophisticated chignon and makeup flawless. From here Mary could see her pale skin rosy and glowing from the chill of the outside air. It seemed only to add to her ethereal loveliness.

Mary had seen the woman in magazines, and thought it was all smoke and mirrors. In this case, she was just like her photos and Mary felt her heart fall to the bottom of her oversized stomach as she looked through the windshield at Erica Fontaine.

As if in suspended disbelief Alec opened the door to the SUV and made his way towards Erica leaving Mary to stare at him in silence as she reached down at let herself out of the vehicle. It didn't take her long to start feeling as if she was on the outside looking in.

She didn't know what to do, she felt trapped. Mary leaned against the vehicle trying her best

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to blend into the background. If she stepped forward she felt as if she was intruding and if she passed her, she couldn't go in the house until Alec unlocked the door.

Either way she was disappointed by Alec's reaction to seeing Erica standing there. She could only surmised he had lied to her because this elegant calm woman didn't act like a woman that had been dumped.

Mary remained by the car. She was curious as to how Alec would talk his way out of this one. She crossed her arms across her breast and waited for one of them to say something. She didn't have to wait long.

"Alec, darling, I tried to wait until next week, but there is so much I need share with you. I had the best meeting with the wedding planner from Paris. He gave us some excellent ideas."

"Erica, didn't you get my message," Alec scowled. "Why didn't you return any of my calls?"

Mary noticed the woman's smile only slipped a bit, but her recovery was remarkable, because if you'd blinked you wouldn't notice she had been affected whatsoever by Alec's rude statement.

"I've been busy and the few times I called I got your voice mail. Didn't you get any of my messages? I told you I would be coming earlier so that I could help get things ready for our families' arrival. I know you're busy with work and I promise I won't be in the way of you and your assistant." Erica patted his cheek and came down the steps towards her with hand outstretched. "Hello. I'm Alec's fiancée, Erica Fontaine, you're must be the assistant I told Alec he needed. Someone sturdy, dependable and hardworking, your name is?"

Mary smiled and took her proffered hand in introduction, nearly backing up from the powerful waft of Gardenia smelling perfume overwhelming her nostrils.

Mary briefly glanced at Alec before returning Erica's smile. "Hello, I'm Mr. Mercer's *temporary* assistant, Mary Christmas."

"You got to be kidding. Is that really your name or are you being festive?" Erica laughed

Mary thought the woman's laughter sounded as insincere as she looked. There was no way Erica could love Alec as much as she did. If he was hers and truly loved her she'd make sure he was the happiest man alive. Grudgingly, she scanned the younger woman's statuesque frame from head to toe. She was about five-feet-seven and adding what look like four-inch heeled boots, Mary had take a few steps back to keep from straining her neck. Mary wondered how she gracefully descended the snow-covered steps without busting her ass.

"No joke. It's my name." Mary forced a bigger smile. "Blame my Momma."

"You look familiar, maybe you worked in my daddy's offices at one time or the other?"

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Erica tapped her toe on the snow dusted stone drive.

Mary shook her head hunching her shoulders beneath her coat reaching the pull the hood over her head to keep the chilly breeze off her ears. “I don’t think so.”

“Oh, now, I remember you’re Lawrence Owens’ girl.” Erica placed a perfectly French manicured hand to her face letting her gaze sweep over Mary from head to toe. “I saw you at the Christmas dinner, dressed up like Mother Christmas or something other. That was almost a year ago.”

Mary ignored the urge to shift from foot to foot in her freshly washed clothing she’d worn going on two days. She also felt infantile and wished she hadn’t placed her hair back into the two ponytails. “Yeah, that probably was me. You know Mr. Owens?”

“Of course, I know all of Alec’s executives.” Erica said licking her dark red lips and glanced back at Alec, who seemed to have grown motionless. “Alec has mentioned you a time or two but I never really paid attention to what he said your name was.”

“All good I hope,” Mary commented softly.

“Of course, dear. Even Owens sang your praise about how sweet you were and your ability to remember everyone’s birthday and such was short of amazing. I’m glad Alec has you to help him, maybe he can finish earlier and enjoy the holiday.”

“It’s already finished, so he is *free* to enjoy the rest of his holiday with his fiancée. I’m sure there is much to discuss before the big day,” Mary mumbled. It was the best she could do when she felt like sobbing her eyes out.

“I don’t know why you would only be a temporary, if you’re finished working already, then I will sway my darling to hire you away from Owens.” Erica giggled placing her hand on Mary’s arm as if they were best friends and leaning closer she said, “I told him, that he had to get rid of that current gold-digging assistant and replace her with—well, someone like yourself— before I would even consider marrying him.”

Mary bit down on her back teeth, her eyes briefly closing and reopening before Erica pulled back. “Someone like me?”

“Yes, you know. Someone he wouldn’t be attempted to sleep with. I even suggested he consider a male assistant,” Erica answered.

“I see.”

“Erica, enough.” Alec finally stepped down from the steps. “Mary, I tried to call her and I left messages, you have to believe me. I--” His deep voice trailed off as she gave him a look that told him she wasn’t going to have this discussion with him; especially not in front of her.

“Alec, what are you doing? Why are you speaking to her like that? I’m sure Mary doesn’t

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need to hear about our petty squabble, isn't that right dear?"

Mary swallowed the lump in her throat and was thankful she didn't get the chance to tell Alec how she felt. That really would give them something to laugh about tonight when they went to bed as if she hadn't already made a big enough fool of herself by sleeping with him."

"Miss Fontaine, again, congratulations on your engagement." Mary put on her good face, threw back her shoulders and with all the effort, she could muster walked up the steps and tested the doorknob, thankful it was unlock, she pushed her way in slamming the door close behind her.

Mary leaned back against the door for a moment to regain her composure but she couldn't stop the tears that burned her eyes and slid down her cheeks. She looked up to see George coming from the kitchen wiping his hands on a dishtowel.

"Welcome back, Mary. Can I get you anything?"

"Yes, uh...can you give me a ride to the closest airport or bus station? I really need to go home. I'm missing my family and I think I've been away long enough."

"There is only transportation by vehicle, sweetheart, the nearest transportation is a train about two hours away. I will be glad to have company to Seattle to pick up the stuff Al ordered for the orphanage." George said softly with understanding. "That is, if you don't mind waiting until the day after tomorrow."

"Oh yeah, I forgot all about that. You're probably really busy getting ready for the event." She dabbed at her damp face with the back of her coat sleeve.

"Yeah, and I was looking forward to having you with us, Mary."

"Maybe, some other time, George," she said with a sad grin. "But I will accept that ride."

He returned her smile. "Sounds like a plan."

"George, I would appreciate it if you kept this between us. Alec might find something else to keep me busy, if he gets wind that I'm leaving earlier then expected." She chuckled through her tears and sniffled. "You know how he can be."

"Unfortunately, yes, and I had hoped this time, things were different." George sighed deeply. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It is what it is," Mary stated softly. "I'm going to turn in early, don't worry about dinner for me, if I get hungry I will open me a can of soup later. Thanks again for everything George."

"My pleasure, Mary."

She made her way up the staircase to the second floor, closing the world off as she curled up on the bed in the bedroom she occupied, willing all thoughts of the time she shared with Alec to disappear.

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“Where is your car Erica? You’re not staying.” Alec ground out between clenched teeth. He ran his hands through his hair and looked up at the door after Mary went in. He could only imagine what she must be thinking. He cursed aloud.

“I had my driver to drop me off.” Erica pulled her coat collar up. “Let’s go in, darling, it’s freezing out here.”

“No! I’m serious you’re not staying Erica.” Alec marched over to the SUV and opened the door. “Get in.”

“Alec, what’s gotten into you? You can’t be serious?” She shrieked at him.

“Do I look like I’m playing here?” He cocked his head to the side in question. “Get in the damned car.”

Erica cast him a long look before sliding into the car, moving her fur out of the way, as Alec slammed the door and went around to enter on the driver’s side.

“Now that you’ve treated me like shit, I’m hoping you will calm down and hear me out,” she stated matter-of-factly. Alec pulled the car door close.

“I was clear in my messages to you Erica. I told you it was over that I had met someone else and I didn’t want you to come here.” Alec stated. “Which part of that did you not get?”

Erica rolled her eyes upwards. “Didn’t you tell me that if you got cold feet to ignore you? I figured you were lying because your bachelor gene had kicked in. Aren’t you the one that said getting married was very important and it would make your mother very happy?”

“It will make her happy, Erica and when I told her I was thinking of proposing to you she wasn’t happy, because she knew I didn’t love you.” Alec gave her an impatient look. “My mother wanted me to marry, but for love, or it wouldn’t be real for her or me. I didn’t understand that until now.”

“I see. I’m just supposed to change all my plans just because you changed yours? Fuck how I’m feeling or the embarrassment this is causing me and my family.”

“Erica I would understand where you were coming from if you loved me,” Alec huffed.

“Alec, are you really that blind? I do love you. I only agreed to go along with your foolish ideas of us having an open marriage and such because I thought it was what you needed to be happy,” Erica cried.

Alec felt a twinge of regret for how he treated Erica. Now that he was in love with someone that obviously didn’t return his feelings he realized that his behavior towards Erica was a bit harsh. He didn’t want to hurt her.

“Erica, I’m sorry,” he apologized. “If I’d known, I would never have suggested we get

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married.”

The silence stretched between them and Alec pressed the button to the engine cutting on the heat in the car.

“Who is she? Do I know her?”

He looked at her as she wiped away a tear with a gloved hand. He didn’t think he’d ever seen Erica cry since he knew her.

“I don’t see what difference it will make by knowing who she is,” Alec murmured.

“It makes a difference to me.” Erica stated. “Women like to know their competition. You aren’t the easiest man to make fall in love with you and I would like to know what this woman has that I don’t?”

“Erica, this is not some contest and I’m not a prize up for barter, even though I’ve felt like one over the years.” His spread hands gripped the steering wheel. “I’ve been an inconsiderate bastard for far too long and I’ve changed. I want more. I have all of this and no one to share it with or I should say no one I wanted to share it with until now.”

He grinned, his mind deep in thought. “Being in love is like something I never expected. When I look at her I see us thirty years from now and I see children.”

He chuckled at Erica’s skeptical look.

“She must be something, if she has you thinking like this,” she said reluctantly.

“She is, to me.”

“Alec, please. I want to know who she is,” Erica beseeched.

Alec hesitated and realized it was pointless. It was just a matter of time before he and Mary was sprinkled across the tabloids. Maybe it was best Erica didn’t find out at the same time everyone else did. She deserved more from him.

“I’m in love with Mary, Erica,” he admitted.

“No way!” Erica shook her head and released a bitter laugh. “You choose that fat black cow over me? My goodness, Alec, have you gone fucking insane? The media is going to rip her to pieces. Not to mention your professional and personal reputation will be affected by this. What can you possibly be thinking? What do your parents think?”

“Don’t insult Mary, she is a good person. Better then you and me put together.” He maintained his affability, but there was a distant harshness in his eyes as he turned his stare on her. “It doesn’t matter what anyone thinks about us, it’s my business and I have enough money that if I lose clients because of it, then my franchise will go on. I was thinking of retiring and return to something else I love doing.”

When she didn’t say anything he continued, “As far as my parents are concerned they want

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me to be happy and I am or I will be if she will have me. You coming here may have ruined any leeway I may have made with her.”

“Mary, simply will not fit in our world, darling,” Erica said with disapproval. “Do you think it would be smart to take her out of the simplistic world where she can dress up in holiday costumes and bake cookies to give out?”

“Hell, I don’t fit your world.” Alec shrugged his broad shoulders. “Every since high school I pretended to be the kid that had everything. The All-American, excelling in all that I did, dated all the right girls, and hung with the right crowd. It worked for me, but now I’m getting old and I’m ready to settle down. I’m too fucking tired to keep up the façade. You didn’t even know I dress up like a elf and visit the local orphanage to give out gifts.”

“I find this entire conversation hard to believe,” Erica scoffed. “I’m thinking any minute now you are going to tell me there is cameras in the car and this is some sick “car confession” show?”

“Why is this so hard for you to grasp? Because I’m rich?” Alec asked. “Take away the money and expensive toys and you will see a small town boy who grew up in Florida. I drove a second hand car, bagged groceries, and painted to put myself through school. Unlike you, my money was hard earned and a lot of luck. You were born into your wealth. Never had to lift a finger unless you wanted to. How are you at keeping a house without a slew of servants? I’m thinking about settling down here on the ranch. I want to fill this place with laughter and children. Can you share this dream with me, Erica?”

“Paint what?” She keyed in on one word. “Houses?”

He briefly wondered if she was trying to sidestep his question about having lots of children. He knew why Erica really never wanted children and had conceded to have only one. She was selfish about her space and time and not as giving and loving as, *his* Mary.

“As a matter-of-fact I do help paint houses in a Community Outreach Program, I belong to, Erica,” Alex admitted and snorted at the surprise look on her face. Did she really think he was truly as shallow as she was? Why hadn’t he realized before that she had never asked him about his private life? All they had in common was their love for late night parties and drinks with all the mover and shakers of Seattle. Other than that, what did he really know of what Erica did when they weren’t out together?

“Well, that’s fine as long as you don’t expect me to do the same,” Erica said.

“Erica,” Alec released a long heavy sigh. “I’m a normal guy. Who happens to not have to worry about paying the bills and unlike you, I wasn’t born with a silver spoon in my mouth and some of my family values are still a part of my life. The fact that you don’t know anything about

”

“I know, I’m sorry,” she grimaced. “Everything I say to you today seems to be the wrong thing to say.”

“It’s okay, because we both know there isn’t anything left to agree about,” Alex stated. “But I was speaking of painting portraits and some day I plan on taking up sculpting,” Alec explained not sure why he was bothering. Erica would never understand.

“You painted portraits?” She eyed him as if he had developed a third eye in the middle of his forehead. “You’re kidding right? Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “You never seemed interested in anything other than the Mercer Advertising franchises.”

“What about daddy? Once we married, he had hoped you would trust him enough to oversee a percentage of your firms,” she reasoned.

“I’m sure he was and it would never happen, Erica.” Alec shook his head. “I know how your father do business and I don’t agree with it. He is overbearing and greedy. My people would never work under him, I would have a mutiny on my hands.”

“With my father running thing, we’d have more money then, God,” Erica exaggerated. “My father is a good business man.” Her lips puckered with annoyance.

““What the hell kind of logic is that?” Alec balked. “God doesn’t need money and I resent the comparison, for there isn’t any. Just in case you haven’t realized this yet, let me enlighten you, sweetheart. Your father is a crook who skimmed his taxes.” Alec snapped and his eyes narrowed on her mottled face, her anger at his words apparent and for once he didn’t give a damn. “The truth is you’re father is broke after the IRS eats his assets and he wants you to marry me in hopes that he can transfer his pride holdings to you and my accounts before the government seizes everything.”

Alec paused his eyes narrowing suspiciously on her face, when she remained quiet. “Oh damn, I’m not telling you anything you didn’t already know, am I? You knew your father was about to lose everything. That’s why you agreed to marry me regardless of the fact that you don’t really love me. Was it because I was the highest bidder or the only one that was stupid enough to ask?”

Erica huffed. “This is a give and take world, you either join in or be left in the dirt. You’re nothing unless you learn how to work the system.”

“At the end of the day you’re not any better then any of the countless women I’ve dated over the years. You know, the women you called whores, the ones that screw me for wealth or fame. So what does that make you? Are you better because you were born a rich girl and now you fuck

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me to save, Daddy?" Alec accused.

"I always knew you were a son-of-a-bitch!" She lifted her hand to strike him and he caught her wrist in his hand. "Unhand me you...you *fat* loving bastard!" Erica snarled. "Don't look so surprised everyone knows you have a secret infatuation for fat women."

"Say what you will Erica but if you move to hit me again, I'll forget I'm a *fucking* gentleman!" He released his hold on her wrist.

She must have taken him serious for her shoulders drooped in quiet defeat.

"I never intended to come here and create a scene," she said. "You were very vague in your message and I thought I deserved to at least know why you had changed your mind."

Alec was never one for knowing the right thing to say to women and this moment wasn't any different. In the end he figured telling her what he was feeling was the best way to go.

"Erica, since my brother died, I didn't think I was capable of feeling anything anymore. I've been walking through my life in a state of numbness doing what was expected to me. Trying to live my life and my brother's at the same time. It was as if I tried to pack a year of living into a day, not caring who's feelings I stepped on to get that rush of feeling alive. My mother wanted me to marry and settle down and at first I wanted to do it to get her off my back." He explained. "I made up my mind to treat marriage as another production contract...and boom! Love came along and kicked me in the gut." Alec grinned.

Shaking his head in stunned disbelief he continued, "This wonderful crazy feelings of stupid happiness is more than I could ever imagined. Forgive me, but I'm grabbing it with both hands. I can only wish that you will find the same thing." He explained as openly and honest as possible.

Alec knew he wouldn't be able to get her to understand. This was something she would have to experience for herself. It was hard to believe there was a time he truly thought he would be contented to marry for all the wrong reasons.

"What do you expect me to say Alec? Congratulation?" She asked angrily. "I can't do it. Do you have any idea the public humiliation I will be going through once this hits the news?"

"You will handle it as beautifully and graceful as you always have, Erica and once the media get news of your father's financial problems, we will become old news, quick. Still, if you want to make me out to be the bad guy, feel free to do so, I no longer care what anyone thinks of me and my image hasn't been all that great in the first place. The only thing I realized is, this is the only life I have and it's mine to live. I can't bring my brother back, no matter how much fast living I do."

"Okay, I can play off breaking up when the woman is at least in my league. But this!

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Dammit Alec, you've dumped me for an obese black woman that is named Mary, fucking, Christmas!" Erica pouted.

"There is nothing else to say about this." His voice was quiet, yet held an undertone of aloof disdain. "Do you have luggage inside?"

"Yes, but, I can't go back in there. I can never face that woman again," she mumbled blowing her nose on Kleenex she removed from Alec's car glove compartment.

"Stay right here and I will go get them. I will drive you back to Seattle." Alec announced before opening the door and slid from the SUV.

Making his way into the house he paused at the staircase. He desperately wanted to go and speak with Mary, but he knew she probably wouldn't even allow him inside her room and what he had to say to her couldn't be said with a locked door between them. The next time he saw her he was going to push all the doubts she had built up in her mind and make his intentions clear.

Determined, Alec turned away from the stairs. He knew he wasn't going to be able to pull this off without help. It was time that he pooled his resources. He already had his father on standby, just in case he needed help and if there were ever a time he needed help it was this one.

"George!" He called out, seeing him moving about in the kitchen. If the older man had heard him, he wasn't letting on. With a tired ragged sigh strolled into the kitchen with hands on his hips. "Hey, didn't you hear me calling you?"

"Yup," George answered nonchalantly.

Alec moaned and rolled his eyes, moving his arms from his hips and crossing them over his chest bracing himself for what he knew was to come. George must have spoken to Mary. *Damn*, he didn't need this aggravation. "Okay, *Old Man*, what's eating you?"

"Al, I've known you've since you were a boy," he said unnecessarily. "You're like a grandson to me and I can't tell you how disappointed I am in you at this moment."

"George--"

The other man lifted his hand to halt him, "Let me speak my peace and then you can have the floor," he interrupted. "Your grandmother is one of my closest friends and I know she raised you to respect and honor women." George fingered his long white beard his bushy eyebrows connecting in deep thought. "Now, what you've been doing, especially since your brother died is just plumb wrong. I don't know where you get off, bringing a new woman out here year after year, using her, breaking her heart, and ushering her out of here before your family and friends arrive like so much garbage. It just ain't right I tell ya."

"Sorry George, I'm pushing for time." Alec scowled. "Please, save the lecture and get to the point."

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“The point is you hurt Mary, and that was a lousy gosh dang thing to do. Seeing this girl wasn’t like the others, I thought you brought her here because, well you might be thinking of settling down. You even took her to visit Ava! I thought that meant she was the one!” He roared his piercing blue eyes unmoving on his face.

“Hold down your voice, I don’t want Mary to hear you. She’s already been through a lot of emotional upheaval the last couple of days.” Alec shifted on his feet and cleared his throat. He felt as if he was ten years old again.

“Whose fault is that?”

Alec chose to ignore the snide remark. “If you must know, you weren’t wrong. Mary is different. As a matter-of-fact, I’m in love with her and all of this has been some big stupid misunderstanding.”

“Good to hear,” George stated. “Now what are you going to do about this mess you’ve made?”

“I’m going to make things right, but not until I return. I have to run Erica back to Seattle and I need you to watch over Mary, for me.”

“You have forty-eight hours, to convince the young lady, you’re worth lovin’,” George mumbled looking into his coffee cup before turning it up to his lips.

“Forty-eight hours,” Alec’s eyes narrowed. “What are you saying?”

“I promise to that sweet girl back to Seattle.”

Alec released a soft string of curses. The fearful image of Mary leaving him forever entered his mind and he felt a lurch in the pit of his stomach. “I would ask you to run Erica home, but I hurt her too and at the very least I need to make sure she gets home safely.”

The older man sighed and looked at him once more. “You know, Al, I believe you’re sincere and you have my support, but I’m a man of my word. If you don’t change Mary’s mind I’m going to take her home because she asked me.”

“Fine,” he snapped. “I promise you by the end of this day Mary will not be wanting to leave me. Just make sure she eats something and watch over her for me.” Alec’s face split into a wide smile. “She’s very precious to me, George.”

George smacked his back and squeezed his shoulders. “Then you best get and drive that Fontaine woman out of here. You can’t get her away fast enough for me. I’ve haven’t been able to get a thing done since she arrived early this morning. Gosh darn, high and mighty actin’ woman, was giving me orders as if she ran the place. Talking about you dodging a bullet with that one.” He chuckled shaking his pale head. “I swear if you had married her, your wedding day would have been the first day of my retirement.”

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"Come on George, we're like family," Alec laughed. "You would have left me high and dry like that?"

"Sure enough," he nodded. "I would have went and helped out your grandmother run the bed and breakfast."

"Speaking of, when are you going to make a honest woman of Mummo?"

"I asked, she said she only had one husband and would until the day she died. So, I take what I can get and at our age, it's rightly enough."

"Well I want Mary as my wife, and I'm not giving up until I get a yes," Alec murmured.

"Is that so? Well you going to have to do something mighty desperate to wipe those tears of hurt from that girl's eyes."

"Don't worry, I am desperate and what I have planned is something from your old book of courting.

"Get her pregnant?"

"Crossed my mind, but she's on birth control."

"Yeah, my "old book of courtin'" needs to be updated." George snickered. "So what is the plan?"

"No time to tell, if I want to get back before midnight I need to get this done. I also have to discuss something with Erica's father and hopefully all feathers will be smoothed back down."

"Where did you place Erica's luggage?"

"As close to the door that I could put them without actually setting them outside on the front porch." George deep timbered voice answered. "Look in the hall coat closet."

"You knew she wasn't staying," Alec said in wonder. "You didn't even place them in one of the guess rooms."

"Nope, I didn't know," he corrected. "I hoped."

Alec laughed and went to load up Erica's things, but first he needed to call Ally to get the ball rolling.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Mary didn't know what to think once she found out that Alec had left with Erica. How could one man be so insensitive? He hadn't even tried to speak with her before he left. It seemed he was making himself clear, he got what he wanted from her and now he was going back to what was best for his public image. Then why bring up love? She didn't ask him to say those words to her. She didn't ask him to give her hope. So why the hell had he said all those wonderful things to her. It wasn't necessary when she had already decided to make him her lover.

The only thing she knew for sure, was once he said the words she definitely needed more than anything for it all to be true. She loved him dearly and maybe if she had told him so, Erica wouldn't have been able to sway him in to going away with her.

She had waited like an idiot for him to come after her and tell her everything she needed to hear. Mary sniffled as her mind raced with many possible scenarios each being worse than the last. The worse being Alec and Erica going to the same hotel they had shared? His hands and mouth doing all those insanely wonderful things to her body that he had done to her.

Mary huffed angrily. The picture she had in her mind didn't fit Alec when he was with the socialite. She couldn't see the woman she met standing in her fur coat in the quaint little inn. It was nice, cozy and clean, just like her. Erica was more of a Ritz Carlton dame.

"Nothing less than six hundred count sheets for me, *dahhhhhling*," Mary mimicked her amusement dying on a sob. "How did my life become such a mess? Was yesterday just a dream?"

The dull ache in her muscles and the stinging sensation when she urinated told her that yesterday was not a dream. It had been real and so were her feelings for this man. She couldn't imagine anyone else kissing or touching her.

With full arms, she managed to grasp the baby soft hand-knitted throw that Mummo had gifted to her. She was happy to see Alec had removed it from the car and brought it into the house along with the shopping bag of her dirty clothes and bath accessories he had purchased for her for their impromptu stay at his grandmothers. She supposed he wanted to make sure she had

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it to take with her when she left. Surely things couldn't end this way. He had to speak with her one more time before she went home.

Oh goodness! I'm going to have to find another job, she thought. There was no way she could work in the same building with Alec as he made wedding plans with Erica. What if as his assistant, they would expect her to hand-address their invitations? That would be horrible. Maybe this would be a good time to take Allison up on her job offer.

Dressed in flannel blue Snoopy printed pajamas, a tattered thick yellow robe, and matching Snoopy-head house slippers Mary made her way to the media room. Her arms were brimming with junk food fare from the kitchen pantry. She was delighted that George kept a well-stocked kitchen. There was everything a girl could hope for to drown her sorrows.

Mary placed the plastic bottle of cola, a bowl of microwave popcorn, a squeezable container of butter, and movie size box of Sugar Baby candy on the black leather sofa beside her. She curled up on the sofa and pulled Mummo's throw over her lap, it somehow gave her a sense of comfort. With a grunt she leaned over and picked up the remote from the side table, and hit the remote to turn on the television.

Reaching for the bowl of popcorn she stashed it between her legs and poured the Sugar Baby candies into it, shaking the bowl to mix it together. While she ate with one hand she used the remote to flip channels with the other. She was on the hunt for the Christmas movie, *It's a Wonderful Life* on television. It always made her feel hopeful and thankful for all the things she did have instead of angry about the things she didn't.

As she stopped on what looked to be a news channel she put the remote down long enough to unscrew the top from her soda. Mary heard Alec's name mentioned and looked up in time to see a picture of Alec smiling and dressed in a tuxedo, taken at some event or other splashed across the screen.

She sniffled and yelled at the TV, "Gorgeous, prick!" Picking the remote back up she hit the volume button to turn up the sound:

"Yes you heard right America. Millionaire playboy bachelor, Alec Mercer, is getting married and the rumors are thriving on who the lucky woman will be. Some are even placing bets online as to who this mystery bride is!"

"Maybe I should place a bet, I know who it is," Mary pouted. "Erica fuckin' Fontaine, people," she bellowed foolishly at the television as if the news anchorwoman could hear her.

"What we do know as fact is, arrangements are being made for a New Years Eve wedding. What a way to start the coming year,

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America! Our reliable source tells us the wedding location is a closely guarded secret and Alec Mercer is walking on cloud nine.

"I don't know about you but I can't wait to find out which one did Alec choose out of his stable of beauties. I suppose we should look for the woman sporting the rumored six-carat heart-shaped diamond and ruby ring he was seen purchasing today. It is said to be the second ring he's purchased in the past month, so what's really going on here? Two fiancée's or maybe it's a Christmas present for the bride-to-be. Either way we aren't letting this go. No way, no how! We are intrigued! So America, stay tuned. Once we find out what's going on at the Mercer camp, you will be the first to know. Now moving on..."

Mary turned the sound down, and resisted the urge to throw the remote across the room. This was not how she wanted to spend her weeks before Christmas. Damn Alec for giving her hope. She thought this was going to be the best holiday of her life and now it was turning out to be the worst.

Why was she surprised, she went into this week thinking Erica was going to be his future wife. Even though he told her he wasn't going to marry Erica and that he loved *her*, he had every right to change his mind. She loved him enough to not resent him for doing what he felt was necessary for his happiness. She had just hoped after last night she was the one that could make him happy. But how would he know that when she hadn't even told him she loved him in return. All of this was her fault. She should have taken Mummo's sage advice and told Alec how she's felt about him for years.

They would be glad to know Alec was marrying a real bitch. She will give them a bonus but tell them how wonderful, loving, tender and sweet he was in bed.

With a sob, Mary grabbed her bowl of popcorn Sugar Baby candy mixture once more and squeezed butter on top of the contents. Depressed, she proceeded to eat and cry.

Setting the bowl aside Mary blew her nose on a napkin and reached for the cell phone she tucked in her robe pocket before leaving the upstairs bedroom. Mary speed-dialed her parent's number hoping to get a progress report on her father and girl-talk with her mom.

After five rings, it was the machine that picked up. Mary looked at the clock on the fireplace mantel noting it was nearly 9:00 pm. She wondered where they could be and hoped her father didn't have to go to the hospital.

"Mom? Dad? If you're home could you pick up please, I need to talk with you." She

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paused a moment. "Okay, I'll try your cell phones and leave a message and now you're not at home." She sighed into the phone. "If I don't reach you, I'm coming home the day after tomorrow, so whoever gets this message first, if dad is worse please call me on my cell phone and let me know. I'm beginning to worry. I love you and I'll check back if I haven't heard from you soon."

Mary clicked the cell phone close. The tears were coming earnestly, she didn't remember ever feeling this lonely before. She pushed the stray frizzed hair that had fallen from her twisty band behind her ears and blew her nose balling the napkin in her fingers.

"I'm all alone and I should be at home buying and wrapping presents with my family. I'm here in the middle of nowhere and Alec doesn't want me...nobody wants me," Mary wailed. "Nobody cares about me." Shoving her used napkin in her pocket and sobbed into her hands."

"That is so not true, Ms. Mary Christmas. I know for a fact that you have several people that care for you.

At the sound of his voice, she lifted her head to find Alec standing over her. "Alec? What are you doing here?"

"Last time I checked, I lived here," he crooned smoothly.

"Humph! Shouldn't you be with Erica planning your New Years Eve wedding?" Mary said accusingly, looking down at her clenched hands. It was too painful to look at his handsome face. He was so calm and contented, while she looked and felt like an utter mess. He could have at least looked as shitty as she felt.

"Ah, that didn't take long to hit the news, I see. Well that's a good thing, I called in a lot of favors to leak the story seeing how it was at the last minute."

Alec took a seat on the couch next to her and she still couldn't look at him. Instead she tried to put some space between them, but the cad was knowingly sitting on the tail of her robe. She was pinned by his side.

He had a huge sectional sofa, why did he have to sit close enough for her to smell his familiar manly scent, mixed with his favorite aftershave. She knew his smell as well as her own, especially now that they had been intimate. His scent was tame compared to the arousing aroma of his heated flesh during hot and heavy sex. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath before opening them with a soft groan.

"You could have saved me some popcorn. I've been running ragged all day and haven't eaten since Mummo fed us early this morning. God, I'm exhausted." Alec washed a hand over his face and she could see the tired dark rings around his beautiful green eyes, after meeting his grandmother she could see the likeness. Like hers, his eyes were kind, loving and--*No! I can't be*

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thinking like this. He has lying eyes. He never really loved me.

“Go away Alec, I want to be alone,” she shouted at him. “I don’t want to hear anything else you have to say.”

Alec blew out his breath in a whoosh and said, “If I’m not mistaken, when I arrived, wasn’t that what had you upset? You felt unloved and alone, crying your beautiful eyes out. You’re even fogging up your glasses.” He reached out and removed them from her face.

“I’m not crying!” She slapped at his hands but it didn’t stop him. He eased her glasses onto the table.

She felt naked without her glasses, especially in her vulnerable state. Alec was watching her so intensely she winced.

“Sweetheart, your nose is red and your cheeks are damp and flushed, it’s obvious you’ve been crying.”

“Standing out in the cold at the park yesterday and today while your fiancée filled me in on all your plans has given me a cold.” She cleared her throat.

“So regardless of the time we spent together and my telling you I loved you, you believed that I could hurt you this way.” He stated more as a fact than a question.

“I told you I didn’t want to hear anything you had to say!”

Mary shrugged out of her robe and threw aside the throw across her legs. She left everything pinned beneath his jean-clad thighs and stood. She needed to get away from him. Having him so close drained her of all reasons. She walked over to the fireplace and stared at its flames.

Look at me Mary,” he ordered.

She could feel him standing close behind her. Mary couldn’t help but to do his bidding. She loved looking at him, even when it was at the office from a distance.

His fixed stare was as soft as a caress causing a tingling in the pit of her stomach. He was so disturbing to her in every way. The smoldering flame she saw in his eyes startled her. How could he choose to marry another woman and look at her this way?

“Sweet Mary, the time for games and misunderstandings are over. At the rate we’re going we’ll both end up blowing the best thing that has ever happened to either of us.”

“Speak for yourself,” she muttered.

She saw the hint of a smile twitching at the corner of his mouth and narrowed her eyes at him, daring him to laugh or make fun while she was in a state of misery. He stole her heart, slept with her and declared undying words of love...well, maybe not undying, but he said the words.

“Mary, I’m sorry. I’m sorry for arguing with you last night, for expecting you to tell me you

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loved me just because I said it first and I'm not surprised after the stunt Erica pulled that you don't trust me, that is if you ever really did. I'm not so sure."

"I can't believe I was going to apologize to you before we got out of the car. I was going to tell you that I loved you since the first time I saw you! Boy, what a fool I've been to not listen to my instincts."

"You love me?" His eyes widened in surprise. "Mary--"

"Don't you touch me," she warned holding out her hand to stop him. "I did love you, but not anymore. It's over!"

When she lifted her eyes to glimpse his reaction, she saw the hurt on his face.

"I knew you would say that." Alec removed his cell phone from the clip at his waist.

Mary glared at him warily, wondering what he was up to.

"What are you doing?" A growing suspicion wrenched at her gut as she saw the new look of determined on his face.

"The only thing I know that I can to make you understand how much you mean to me. Before we leave this room, Mary, you will know that it's you that I love and only you."

"Alec--"she began.

"Nope, it's too late to turn back now, so be quiet. Can't you see I'm on the phone?"

"Humph!" Mary scowled crossing her arms across her breast and tapping her Snoopy clad feet against the wooden floor.

Alec's dancing eyes traveled downward and he snorted with mirth before speaking into the phone at his ear. "Hello how did it go? Yes, I tried to reason with her, but she is too stubborn for her own good."

"I'm--" Mary clamped her lips shut as he narrowed his most sinful gaze on her breast that were visible from the opening of the top two buttons of her pajamas. She huffed and fisted her collar close.

He had the nerve to give her a sweeping smile that touched her all the way to her feminine core. *Damn his hide. He's sexy as hell and knows it.*

"I'm afraid we're going to have to move on to plan "B". Yes, you were right, Mary didn't swoon all over me when I got here as I hoped she would." Alec winked at Mary.

"As if!" She murmured rolling her eyes at him.

"I know I owe you dinner at the most expensive restaurant in Seattle." He spoke gruffly into the phone. Once again his eyes stole to her feet and back up to her face. Chuckling and shaking his head he placed his hand over the mouth of the phone. "You look absolutely adorable."

"Liar, you know I look awful," she blurted and hated the fact that he could make her smile

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with just the simplest words.

“Yeah, I’m sure I want to do this. It’s the only way. Thanks, I knew I could depend on you.” Alec closed his phone and clipped it back at his waist.

“What was that about?” Mary inquired.

“Are you willing to hear me out, now?” Alec lifted his hands and smoothed strands of hair off her face and behind her ear. The flat of his fingertip teased the outline of her ears.

She felt herself swaying into his touch and caught herself, brushing away his hands like an irritating bug. “Stop that. I will listen to you, but if you going to tell me what I already know, then I prefer to pack up my snacks and turn in for the night.”

“Mary, I have never told a woman besides my Mother and Mummo that I loved her. So it isn’t words I throw around casually.” Alec reasoned. She listened. “Mary, this hasn’t been some big ploy to get you into my bed.”

“I know that,” she scowled.

“You do?” His usually deep voice cracked in surprise.

“Of course, I came to your office, you didn’t come to me,” she reminded.

“Yeah, it took me awhile to realize it was you because you walked past my office for the past two years and not once came in to see me personally. I was so stressed and when I saw you, all I could see was you being your usually kind self and the sudden answer to all my problems...my Christmas angel in the flesh. Owen had sung your praises over the years and I thought this would be a win for the both of us. You know the business and you’ve worked on contracts before...”

Mary released a long sigh before saying, “Is this going somewhere?”

She already knew all of this and he was right, she took a chance and did something she never had the nerve to do before. She went to him. She desired to see if he was as handsome up close as he seemed to be on television and from afar or was it all smoke and mirrors. He was even more handsome in person and in spite of her giving him a hard time she was secretly delighted that he needed her help. It would mean getting to know him better and finding out more about him as a person and she had. Now she loved him because in actuality he was a wonderful man.

It was her own doubt in her attractiveness that had stopped her from going into his office years ago. It was those same fears that made her think she couldn’t hold her own against Erica Fontaine and stay to fight for her man. Mary knew she could speak a confident game, but it was a lie. Her current need to believe Alec had failed her, proved that she hadn’t thought she was attractive enough to hold on to him and it was easier to push him away than to be wrong.

A stab of guilt pained her heart.

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"I can see that mind of yours working overtime," he released a loud groan and cursed. "Damn it, Mary, can't you look at me and tell how crazy I am for you?"

Yes, she could see it and she could feel it too, but she assumed all of it was her own turbulent emotions for him and was reading things into every kind word he gave her, every long look, and lingering kiss. She never felt like Homely Mary when he looked at her. She felt loved, adored and as beautiful as any supermodel or socialite.

Mary reached up and touched his face. "I'm sorry," she murmured. Her eyes shimmering with emotion, "I made a mistake by placing my insecurities from years of living with my scars and people talking about my weight. I was blinded to the fact that it wasn't an act for you. You really think I'm beautiful."

She could see he was amazed by her comment. "You're more than beautiful, you steal my breath away," he smiled. His hands eased around her neck and he tugged her towards him, she went into his arms willingly. "Tell me sweetness, did I make love to you like a man who thought you were ugly and doing you a favor? Hell, I was the one that was weeping like a baby when I came."

Mary laughed aloud and shook her head. "You are crazy? Do you really know what you are getting into? Once I give all my love to you, you aren't going to know how to handle all that love. We big girls love hard."

"Trust me, I give as well as I get," he assured her. "Mary, say you will stay with me."

Mary didn't have time to respond before the anxious assault of his mouth on hers made her forget why she had been angry with him. The exquisite padding of his lips stole her breath and set her body aflame. Anticipation rode her hard and she couldn't seem to get close enough.

Panting hard Alec was the first to break the kiss. "I love you. I love you. I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life showing you how precious you are to me. Please say you will let me," he begged.

She couldn't say anything. She was scared she had eaten herself into a Sugar Baby comma, passed out on the couch, and was having the sweetest dream ever.

"Tell me I'm not dreaming," she blew against his lips.

"You're not dreaming." He said. "Mary, I love you," he declared once more while sweeping his sweater off over his head, dropping it to the floor. "Say it," he murmured in between wet loud kisses.

Alec's fingers made quick work of the buttons on the front of her pajama top, pushing it off her round shoulders onto the floor. He unhooked her bra and let it drop. Her heavy brown breasts appeared bathed in a toasty glow from the light of the fireplace.

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“Oh, Alec.” Mary moaned arching her neck to the side as he sprayed her throat with hot breathy kisses.

“I want to hear you say it Mary.” He held her face in his hands and moved his lips over hers devouring any words she had to say with his searing kiss.

“Alec,” she whispered. “I love you. I always have.”

He took her face in his hands and held her still. “Marry me, Mary.”

“Okay,” she nodded with big tears in her brown eyes.

“Yes? Did I hear you say, yes?”

She nodded again, laughing happily beneath her tears. “I probably will wonder why I said yes, after I’m able to think clearly, but at this moment I can’t think of anything I want more than to be your wife, Alec.”

“Oh, God, Mary...Mary!” He laughed out and picked her up swinging her around in circles. “Why...I mean...why do you believe me, now?”

Mary laughed and slid down his body until her toes touched the ground. “Because you told me you love me.”

“I’ve said it before.” He stared at her warily as if he was the one needing the convincing. “Tell me what I did right this time so I will know to do it often in the future.”

Mary beamed. “Alec, look at me. I mean really look at me. If you can still love me at my worst, then you’re either blind as a bat and not telling me the truth or you really must love me.”

“I suppose I do, because you look good enough to eat.” He laughingly swooped in to seize her mouth once more. Greedily and needy they peeled off the remaining clothing that kept them from laying their hands on the other’s naked flesh.

Alec took Mary’s hand and dropped to the white fur rug in front of the fireplace. She watched his hard perfect ass as he crawled over and dragged the throw his grandmother had given her from the sofa. Coming back to her side he eased down beside her and drew the covers over them.

Mary welcomed him as he moved over her leg to lie between her legs, spreading them wide with his hips. With ease her knees came up and her legs wrapped naturally around his hips.

“I’ve thought about this all day,” he smiled brilliantly.

“So have I,” she admitted as relief coursed through her.

Mary groaned with pleasure. Her heart was pounding and the sound in her ears was like a rushing storm. Their bodies slid against each other and she pressed kisses to his skin, nipping at his flesh as her excitement grew. She moaned his name and he covered her open mouth with his.

She shifted her position and took him by surprise by managing to turn him onto his back,

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and then she climb on top of him. Bracing her hands on his chest, she grinned down at him and slowly lowered herself on his hard cock.

His hands went to her hips to hold her. "You...you're sure you ready for this?"

She nodded, "Oh yeah." Mary hissed as her body put up a mild protest by the deep intrusion. For a moment she waited, impaled allowing her vaginal muscles to adjust. She was still tender but it was such pleasurable pain, she couldn't stop if she wanted to. "I really like this position," she manage to say before lifting and lowering herself with the help of his hands at her waist.

"Aaaaaah!" Alec gasped and cursed. "Fuck, you feel so good. If it's too much let me know."

"Don't you dare stop," Mary whimpered. She leaning over him until her breast was pressing flat into his chest giving her free access to nibble and kiss his shoulders.

"I couldn't if my life depended on it," Alec grunted and gripped the cheeks of her ass spreading it wide.

"Young man if you don't unhand my daughter you aren't going to have much of a life left! What the hell is going on here?" A loud voice boomed like cold water thrown on two rutting dogs in heat.

Mary squealed and slid off Alec, gripping the throw cover in her fist. Alec sat up, making sure nothing was showing. He had the nerve to grin at the four mottled faces looming in the doorway of the media room.

"Hello, Mr. Christmas, Mrs. Christmas, good to see you again." When her father didn't return his greeting, he cleared his throat "Mom...Dad."

"Oh, Alec!" Nessa Mercer placed her hands over her face, shaking her head.

"Stop grinning." Mary scowled at Alec, holding the quilt in place up over her breast. "Daddy, err...it's good to see you're feeling better. I was worried, you had been placed in the hospital."

"Yeah, I can see how worried you were," he murmured. "Trying to give me a heart attack just in case the flu didn't kill me."

Mary blushed up to the roots of her mussed hair. "Mommy, what are you doing here?" she asked thinking it was best not to address her father until he calmed down. He wasn't having it. He had more to say.

"No, young lady." Her dad boomed. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Don't worry sir," Alec piped in. "As I told you earlier today, I love Mary and I'm going to make an honest woman out of her. A little before you came in she agreed to marry me and well, I was extremely happy, as you can see."

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Mary turned and looked at Alec until he turned his own special shade of red and looked away, but for the life of her she couldn't understand why he would be grinning like that during a time such as this. He had to be crazy as a loon.

"Young man. You're lucky I didn't bring my old service revolver." Her father threatened. He was a force to be reckoned with. Well over six-feet-four and two hundred and sixty pounds, still very attractive for his years.

Mary was scared shitless but Alec was his usual calm self and why hadn't he told her he went to visit her parents today? Did the man have no shame? "Alec, did you know they were coming up here?"

Alec shrugged sheepishly. "Well yeah, but I kind of...sort of...forgot."

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously as his face and his ears were nearly purple they were so red. "You're lying to me, I can tell." Mary punched him on the shoulder. "You...were hoping this would happen, weren't you?" She shrieked and punched him again. "Why would you do that?"

"Mary, I was desperate and I needed you to give me more time. I figured if you didn't get past your stubbornness and accepted the fact that you loved me so I could propose to you. I knew that you said your family was old fashioned. So I figured that if your dad saw you compromised. You'd have to marry me."

"If the man wants a "shotgun" wedding, just show me where to find one," Mary's father bellowed.

Mary ignored him. She was too busy looking at Alec. "I can understand being caught sleeping together but, we were..." she cut her eyes at their parents and felt her entire face blushing. "You know."

"We weren't supposed to get the chance to go this far, sweetheart. I called and if they had left right when I called, then we'd at least be partially dressed."

For the first time Alec's father spoke, "The uh...path from the bunk house was iced over, so George had to go easy."

Alec lovingly caressed her cheek. "It doesn't matter, the moment you told me you loved me, I went brain numb and when I touched you all thoughts of company coming was forgotten. I apologize to everyone, but I was anxious to make Mary see reason."

"He was desperate, all right," someone voiced.

"Aw," she cried, her eyes watering. "You do know you are the craziest Caucasian I've ever known, don't you?" she crooned against his lips. But you're my crazy White man so I will tell you this because I love you dearly. "If you ever pull another stunt like this, if my daddy don't

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kill you, I just might.”

“He won’t be around because I’m killin’ him tonight. Enough of this...this...”

“This what Joseph Christmas. Stop acting like you’re clueless especially after the way you did it last night.” Mary’s mother grabbed her husband’s arms and leaned into him with an openly suggestive look.

“Mom! Miriam!” Joseph and Mary cried out in unison.

The room erupted in tension relieving laughter.

“Mary dear, you and Alec, get dressed before your father’s blood pressure goes through the roof.” Miriam took her husband by the arm to lead him away. “Come Joe, lets give the children some privacy.”

“Privacy? Miri, if we leave them, there is no tellin’ what he’s going to do to my little girl.”

“Looked like our little girl was doing all the doing,” Miriam teased. “She took after her Momma after all.”

Joe grinned and slapped her on the bottom playfully. “Woman, you must be forgettin’ we got an audience too. My daughter first, now you trying to kill me.”

Mary grinned. This was the way it has always been with her parents. She envied it and now she had the opportunity at such happiness. She couldn’t wait to be Alec’s wife.

“Don’t worry Miriam, we aren’t shy, as you can see by the behavior of my son. Forgive him for he knew exactly what he was doing. I don’t agree with it, but I understand it.” Retired Dr. Larson Mercer spoke up with a chuckle.

The older man turned one last time to his son, “Get dressed boy and bring Mary into the living room where we can get a proper introduction.”

“Okay, Dad.”

“Oh yeah, son, way to go. It’s good to see you’re finally happy. It’s all we ever wanted.

“Way to go? Joe mumbled gruffly. “What if that was your daughter. I--”

“We know, dear,” Miriam and Nessa chided in unison interrupting his banter while, looking at each other and laughing.

“We’re going to get along fine,” Nessa smiled. “I’ve always wanted a daughter.”

Mary and Alec watched in fascination as their parents chatted and disappeared into the foyer. “When did they meet, much less become friendly with each other?”

“I made some phone calls. The first one was when we first got here. I spoke to my mother and told her that her Christmas wish had come true. I found the woman I wanted to spend the rest of my life with.”

“You knew it before we got here?” she gulped and grinned at him.

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“Yes, I did,” he admitted nuzzling his nose against hers. “I asked mother to make herself known to the Christmas’, so they wouldn’t be shocked when I spoke to them about marrying you. I wasn’t sure how your parents would feel about me. I figured if they saw my parents were White they would put it together. When I took Erica back to Seattle I made a few stops before I returned.”

“Oh, Alec.”

I wouldn’t have went through all of this trouble if you hadn’t been so distrusting and stubborn.”

“I wasn’t.” Mary said as if she was truly affronted.

“Were to,” he gave her a quick peck.

“I can’t believe you would do all of this...for me.” Mary shook her head. “You know my Daddy could have killed you. Now, that was just stupid.”

“I love you and I would risk my neck to make you my wife.” He dipped his head and lightly bit her neck. “I hadn’t planned on our parents catching you raping me. But I’m learning after years of endless control that when it comes to you, sweet Mary, my little head is thinking overtime and my big head just follows instructions?”

“Hey,” she laughed. “I see the little head is talking again.”

His face grew serious. “Marry me New Years Eve, I don’t want to wait. He leaned away from her and dragged his discarded coat over to him. He removed a black velvet box from the pocket. “I picked this up for you today.”

“Let me guess.” She looked upward and placed a finger to his chin. “A six caret heart shape diamond and ruby ring.”

He looked taken aback. “How--”

“The media, of course.”

He laughingly shook his head. “Of course.” Opening the box he took hold of Mary’s hand and slid the ring on. It was a little snug and he assured they would go and get it fitted as soon as they returned home.

“They also said it was your second ring in a month,” Mary leaned into him.

“Well, I had brought one with me that I had picked out when I was thinking of marrying Erica and I realized that didn’t fit how I felt about you. So I didn’t feel right giving it to you. I also have one that has been in the family for years and passed on to me to give to my wife. I still want you to have that one to wear, but it just didn’t seem big enough to express how much I loved you. I wanted you to have one that was just yours, one that you could pass on to our daughter some day.”

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"You beautiful silly man." She kissed him. "You could have tied a string around my finger and I still would be yours, but I thank you for putting up with my doubts and fears. Also for going out of your way to prove how much you love me. I will never forget this moment."

"I can't believe you've been walking around the office hankering after me for the past two years. I wished you'd said something sooner, or at least walked into my office the first time I saw you outside my door," he accepted her kisses.

"I wished I had too. We could have avoided all this confusion," She kissed his chin and suckled on his bottom lip.

"I did pretty good in a pinch, didn't I?" He offered his tongue to her. "You didn't say if you're available to marry me in a few weeks."

"Well, we mustn't disappoint the media," she said playful allowing him to sweep her up into his arms and onto his lap.

They kissed hungrily. The booming sound of her father's commanding voice echoed from the other room.

"Mercer, get my baby-girl in here right now, or you will need until next Christmas to heal. Forget the Honeymoon!"

"Mary?"

"Hmm?"

"How about I make a few calls and we hire a helicopter to take us back to Seattle and we catch a private plane ride to Las Vegas tomorrow."

"Why?"

"Because, if your father expects me to keep my hands off of you until New Year's eve, you're looking at a dead man. I'm sneaking up to your room tonight and he will have to shoot me to stop me."

"Don't worry, baby. I'll get on top again. He won't shoot you if my big butt is in the way," she assured him pulling his face back to hers.

Mary and Alec fell against each other in laughter, both realizing Christmas was so much better when you get what you wished for.

May you get all your Christmas wishes!

All I Want For Christmas



SHIREE MCCARVER

Interracial relationships with action, romance, humor and emotions rolled into one memorable tale has become a trademark of Alabama native, Shiree McCarver's novels. She learned a long time ago that laughter and dreams is necessary for daily survival. Ms. McCarver loves hearing from her readers. She can be reached at:

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Shiree McCarver

Other books by Shiree McCarver



SELBY MAISON has worked her way up from an orphan to a successful recording star. Only to find at thirty-five her career is fading, she has a failed marriage, and now can never have children. What's a girl to do?
DARIUS ANDROS is a shape-shifting Satyr from Ancient Greece. He is searching for a soul mate that can give him a family he so longs for. With one catch she must be a descendant of the Nymphs for it to work.
Can Selby accept the offer of undying love from Darius? To be immortal and be able to have children that would be half Satyr? Together they must face fears they both have and make a decision of life immortal or human.



Selby and Darius are getting married and trouble ensues... "I have no patients for men...especially Sylus de Gauls." Lesbian, Entertainment Executive, Zaza Draper, has no patients for men in general. Therefore, as maid of honor in her best friend, Selby's, wedding it forces her to work closely with pompous best man, Sylus de Gauls.
"Human females bore me...especially Zaza Draper." Musician extraordinaire, Sylus de Gauls, thought after centuries of all kinds of women he could handle this *one*, but Zaza was more than one Satyr should have to deal with in a lifetime.
"It's physically impossible for a Satyr to love a human female!" Za and Sy are on a mission to find Selby's birth mother before the big wedding. As Sy learns Za's secrets, a forbidden love develops, bringing the forces of the Darkworld upon their heads. Can love prevail or is death imminent?



Wolf biologist Sera Tibbs is attractive, smart, and respected in her field. She is also dying. When she decides to relocate to **Lake Tahoe** to complete her research, she never dreamt she would encounter her soul mate in the midst of taking her last breathe she his rescued by a 6'4 virgin shifter who swears he is her fated lover and promises to save her from the illness ravishing her body.
Impotent and colorblind, Lykian born werewolf, Justus Apollon has been tracking a serial killer for two centuries. Never, has he disregarded his duties; until, he unexpectedly encounters his 'weakness', Sera. In love, Justus discovers a world, of colors and passion, only to leave himself vulnerable to his enemy. Will Justus seduce Sera into becoming a she-wolf so she may live? Will Sera choose immortality with Justus, only to risk dying in the vengeful hands of his adversary, once known as Jack the Ripper? Justus will do anything in his power to keep Sera safe as he helps her come to grip with her role in his life



Lord Ethan Clare is his own man although his family and Queen are forcing him to do his duty and marry once again. He lost his first wife in childbirth and he really does not want to marry again. Ethan will do as he is asked even though he has fallen for another. He has made many enemies while working for his Queen. Now he has found the one for him and they are both tangled in a web of intrigue and deceit. Ethan has his hands full with the mysterious Sauda, his family duties and trying to discover who the leader of the Knights of Darkness is. Ethan is different from the rest of his family and he does not know why. Sauda is like no one he has ever met and he is willing to give everything up for their forbidden love.
Sauda Mauri is a trained assassin. She has been a slave and an assassin for many years and now she has a chance of freedom if she can complete her mission. She has run away from her master and is traveling under the guise of Lady Francis's nursemaid so she can get her assignments and earn her freedom. She does not need a complication and Lord Ethan is more than determined to be just that. She will not let her emotions get the better of her; she has a job to do. Sauda will not be his mistress and can never be his wife. Will Sauda follow her heart or will she settle for being Ethan's mistress? Will Ethan forget family duties and take a chance with his forbidden love?



A Holiday Tale of two opposites realizing all they wanted for Christmas is the same thing...unconditional love.

All Alec wanted for Christmas was an assistant he wouldn't want in his bed.

Playboy Advertising mogul Alec Mercer sees nothing wrong with mixing business and pleasure. That is until he discovers his ex-assistant had sabotaged his clients contract renewals, because of a broken heart. The mistake could have cost him millions in revenue. He swears he's going to straighten out his personal life. Starting with proposing to his on again off again socialite girlfriend Erica, and settle down.

All Mary wanted for Christmas was a man who could love her as she was.

Mary Christmas, yep...that's her name. She's a big woman with a big heart. She wears glasses and not too pretty but she's as jolly as the come. Working in an office full of beautiful slim women can be trying. Having a secret crush on the boss, Alec Mercer, was downright ridiculous. There was no way a guy like that could like someone like her, or so she believed. Now that Mary got her Christmas wish in the flesh, what is she going to do about it?

Together, they make Christmas wishes a reality...

What color is love? I dare you to dream outside the box.

www.shireemccarver.com