



A **DIAMOND**
FOR CHRISTMAS

DIAMONDS ARE FOREVER ~ 3

PEGGY HUNTER

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A Diamond For Christmas [Diamonds Are Forever Book 3]
by Peggy Hunter

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A DIAMOND FOR CHRISTMAS

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A Diamond For Christmas [Diamonds Are Forever Book 3]
by Peggy Hunter

Dedication

For R.J.

Thanks for the memories!

Chapter 1

Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way!

The music, piped through the intercom all over the Diamond Industries building, was driving Maxwell Diamond around the bend. He hated Christmas. He hated the decorations that went up right after Thanksgiving. He hated how the streets were crowded with shoppers. He hated the spirited employees who cheerfully wished him a Merry Christmas. But most of all, he hated Christmas songs. Jingle Bells was right on top of his most-hated Christmas tunes list. And, if he heard Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer one more time, he'd puke in the red velvet pants pooled on the floor at his feet.

Edward Diamond walked into his son's massive office. His elderly face crinkled as he frowned. "Haven't you got that damn suit on yet?"

Max glared at the jacket and hat on his desk before he looked at his father. "No," he said through clenched teeth. He'd just recently chased off his secretary who'd attempted to help him into the suit, hence the bright red pants at his feet. "I don't know why someone else can't do it."

Edward's frown deepened. "I wore that getup for more years than I care to remember. But in the last few years, Zachary played Santa," he said, referring to his second oldest son.

Max grimaced at the wad of red fabric on his desk. "So what's that got to do with me?"

"Because Zach took Brianna to the Bahamas for a week."

Max snorted, certain his half-brother timed his vacation on purpose. "Yeah. It just had to be this week."

Edward's grey brows furrowed and his nostrils flared. "Zach has earned it. It's the second week of December and this is the first time he's taken time off all year." The old man hesitated before he added, "Unlike you."

Max rolled his eyes. If he had a dime for every time his father chastised him for not pulling his weight at Diamond Industries, he'd...well, he'd have almost as much in his bank account as he had now. Being vice president of Diamond Industries meant nothing. It was just a title bestowed on him when his father retired. Zachary, as president, pulled all the strings. So what if Max took a lot of time off work? It wasn't like he was expected to do anything.

Edward wagged a finger at his youngest son. "It's time you got off your ass and did something to earn all the money I give you every month."

"What has that got to do with me dressing up like Santa Claus?" Max asked.

"It's a start," Edward said. "It'll show our employees that every Diamond involved in this outfit has spirit. So shut up and put the damn suit on. The party starts in half an hour and," the old man's bushy eyebrows rose as he glared at Max, "you better be there."

Max sighed heavily as his father turned to the door. Before he walked out, Edward turned to him. "And, by the way, I fully expect you to attend my wedding on Boxing Day."

Max winced. Is he serious? It wasn't like his old man took marriage seriously. Max was born to Edward's third wife who

he walked away from soon after. His father was too busy bagging his next conquest to have time for his third wife and son.

Like the first two Diamond brides, Max's mother seemed okay with Edward's wandering as long as he kept the money flowing. Edward was virtually a stranger to Max until he was in his early teens. Then his father put him through college, where Max earned his Masters in Business.

Max watched as his father's fourth marriage failed as badly as his first three. The only saving grace in that marriage was that a child had not been produced. Well, none that they knew of anyway.

And no one was surprised when Edward's fifth marriage, to the young and very horny Samantha, ended within months.

When would the old man finally get a clue?

Max offered a labored grin. "I'll be there."

When the door closed, Max looked down at the bright red pants with white faux-fur cuffs at his feet. He took a deep breath and stepped into them.

* * * *

"Hey, young lady."

Julie Thornton looked from side to side before she finally rested her eyes on the man, dressed as Santa, sitting in a massive armchair. "Are you talking to me?"

"Of course I'm talking to you," the sorry excuse for a Santa replied and then offered a very weak, "Ho, ho, ho!"

Julie grinned. Whoever he was, playing Santa was not his forte. The crowd in the cafeteria of Diamond Industries was

almost oppressive. In the two years since Julie had taken a job in the mail room, she'd avoided the Christmas party. And she'd have avoided it again if her coworkers hadn't insisted she come with them. She'd long since lost sight of them and, being left on her own, she moved to the closest wall in an effort to gain a bit of space.

"Sit on my lap and tell me what you want for Christmas," Santa said.

Julie looked down at him. When a passerby brushed her hand, her empty wineglass fell to the floor. When she would have picked it up, another passerby kicked it out of sight.

"I've got a direct line to the bar," Santa said. "Sit on my lap, tell me your wishes and you'll get a fresh drink."

Julie grinned. "Trust me," she said, "you don't want to know what I wish for."

Santa reached out and pulled her down on his lap. Strong arms held her in place and there was no mistaking the fact he had muscular legs under the baggy red pants he wore. "I want to know," he said. "In fact, I insist you tell me."

Julie peered at the man. About all she could see were rich brown eyes peeking out from under bushy wads of cotton meant to be eyebrows. But the muscles she felt beneath her, not to mention the strength of his arms when he pulled her down, made her body sizzle with awareness. "Who are you?"

"Why, I'm Santa, of course."

Even though Julie had never attended a Diamond Christmas party before, she'd heard that Zachary Diamond had taken over the role when the old man gave it up. But she knew Zachary wasn't around this year. He and his new love,

Brianna O'Ryan, had taken off for the Bahamas. The gossipmongers could tell all the tales they wanted but Julie had an inside track...she had befriended Brianna some time ago.

So who is playing the part of Santa this year? Judging by the muscles rippling beneath her, she guessed it had to be one of the few bicycle messengers Diamond Industries employed. And, while the voice didn't quite fit the one messenger who'd always hit on her, there was a good chance he'd disguise it to keep her in the dark.

"Scott, is that you?"

Santa chuckled lightly but did not reply.

Julie grinned and relaxed against him. She'd always hated how Scott hit on her in the mail room. After all, she'd set her sights on someone else. Now, sitting on his lap and having had a few glasses of wine, feeling his steely strength beneath her, she couldn't help but feel a ripple of desire.

"All right, Santa," Julie said. "How many Christmas wishes do I get?"

Dark brown eyes twinkled as he looked at her. "Have you been naughty or nice?"

Julie grinned. "Mostly naughty."

Santa's eyes darkened. "In that case, you get two wishes, maybe three."

Julie nodded as she cuddled closer to him. "Okay. My first Christmas wish is for another glass of wine."

Santa raised his arm and waved. When a waitress showed up, he ordered a glass of wine. It arrived almost before Julie

could take a breath. He placed it on the small table by the armchair.

"What's your second wish?"

Julie sighed. "I want a Diamond for Christmas."

Santa frowned. "A diamond?"

"Not the stone," she said.

"What other kind of diamond is there?"

Julie wiggled on Santa's lap. "Don't tease," she chided.

"You work here too so you know the kind of Diamond I'm talking about."

"I know four Diamond men; three are spoken for," Santa said.

Julie reached for her glass and took a long sip. The wine gave her the courage to say more. "Yes, but I'm talking about Maxwell Diamond," she said. "Unfortunately, he doesn't know I exist."

Santa lowered his head for a moment and then looked at her again. "What makes you think Maxwell Diamond is the man you want?"

Julie reached for her glass and took a sip of wine. When she looked at Santa, his brown eyes sent a ripple of desire through her. "I don't know," she replied honestly. "I've only ever seen him from a distance. But there's something about him," she said.

"Explain," Santa urged.

"I can't describe it," she said.

"Try."

Julie took a deep breath and gave herself a mental shake. Did she really want to confide in Scott? It was only a matter

of time before it would be spread around, not just in the office but over the city. Julie shook her head. "I think I've said too much already."

Santa nodded knowingly. "Well," he said, "I might not be able to make good on your second wish. Better tell me your third wish."

His hand slid from her back to her hip, his touch gentle, soothing and yet so damn erotic. Her body relaxed, enjoying his sensual touch. The words tumbled from her mouth before she could stop them. "It's been almost six months since I've had sex."

"That's a statement, not a wish."

"All right," Julie said. She took another long sip of her wine and took a deep breath. "I wish to have sex tonight."

Santa's cotton beard scratched her neck when he whispered in her ear, "That's a wish I'm looking forward to granting you." He grabbed her hand and she felt something cool pressed into her palm.

"That's the key to the executive restroom," he said against her ear. "Meet me there when the party's over."

Executive restroom? Just how could someone like Scott get a key to the executive restroom?

But that question would go unanswered as Santa pushed her off his lap. It wasn't until she stood up that she noticed several women waiting for a chance to take her place. When she turned to retrieve her glass of wine, she realized she'd have to fight a crowd of women to get to it. She couldn't be bothered...in fact, she was sure she'd already had too much to drink. Julie placed the key in her pocket, unsure if she'd

actually follow through with it. Santa may well have been toying with her. How many more keys would he hand out tonight?

As Julie walked away, she glanced over her shoulder. Santa had a buxom blond sitting on his lap. Yet his eyes were focused on her. Julie smiled and Santa's eyes twinkled in response. He nodded lightly before he turned his attention back to the woman on his lap.

For the rest of the evening, Julie sauntered around the cafeteria. When her friends from the mail room were ready to leave, she hesitated. "Think I'll stick around for a little longer."

Nina, the mail room supervisor, frowned. "Why?" she asked. "The only time you looked remotely interested in the party was when you were sitting on Santa's lap."

Julie felt her face flush. Did Nina know? She wondered if her supervisor knew the executive bathroom key was burning against her hip as it lay in her pocket. She attempted a nonchalant shrug. "The party's almost over," she said. "I might stick around to help clean up."

Nina's eyes narrowed but she didn't comment. "Okay then," she said. "Even though you only live a few blocks from here, I want you to take a taxi home."

Julie nodded.

Nina continued. "Walking home in the middle of the night isn't safe. This is downtown Toronto, you know."

"I know."

"Promise me you'll take a taxi."

"I promise."

When Nina finally left, Julie breathed a sigh of relief. Sometimes she got a little tired of her boss' overprotective nature. Sure, she'd grown up in Pencil, Ontario, a small town several miles north of Toronto, but that didn't mean she was a country bumpkin. When Julie moved to Toronto, she quickly embraced all the city had to offer.

That said, Julie knew she didn't have enough money to take a taxi home. She'd have to hoof it and, if she actually followed through with going to the executive restroom, she just might be walking home in the middle of the night.

Julie's hand went into her pocket and clasped the key. She'd worry about getting home later. Right now her head was doing battle with her heart...should she go to the executive restroom or not?

As people filtered out of the cafeteria, Julie's eyes fell on Santa's chair. It was empty. She peered around, seeing the cleaning crew picking up empty glasses and Styrofoam plates. No bright red suit in sight. Had Santa left the building or...Julie's body tightened in anticipation...had he escaped to the executive restroom to wait for her?

Driven by a force she did not recognize as her own will, Julie walked out of the cafeteria and headed for the elevators. The executive suites were on the top floor so, when she stepped inside the elevator, she touched her finger to the eleventh floor button. Her heart pounded as the door slid closed and carried her up...light years away from her job in the basement as a mail room clerk.

When the door slid open, Julie stepped out. As she walked down a long corridor, she passed huge double doors with

large gold letters that read Edward Diamond. As the founder and former president of Diamond Industries, the old man still kept an office, keeping an eye on his two sons while they ran the family business.

Directly across the hall, large gold letters spelled out Zachary Diamond, President. The lord and master, the chosen one...the most powerful man in Toronto and perhaps all of the country. Zachary Diamond was the supreme ruler of Diamond Industries and their subsidiaries.

A few steps further down the hall and Julie stopped when she saw Maxwell Diamond, Vice President, spelled out on another door. She ran her fingers over the gold embossed letters. Her body began to quiver; just the idea of being this close to him made her shiver with excitement.

Julie whirled around and pressed her back to Maxwell's office door. As much as she wanted him, that wasn't why she was here tonight. Santa had promised to fuck her and oh, she needed it so much. So what if she gave in and had a little fun with a bicycle messenger? It wasn't like she was going to marry the guy. And it certainly wasn't like Maxwell Diamond would be jealous. The youngest Diamond son didn't even know she existed. Hell, none of the Diamond clan did. But it was Maxwell who'd filled her dreams every night. She wanted him, needed him.

Julie pushed off the door and peered down the hall. Where exactly is the executive restroom anyway?

She didn't have to venture far before she found it. Every instinct in her body told her to run. Yet she stood there,

staring at the door. The key in her hand felt cool against her overheated skin.

She had to know. Was Santa toying with her or was he there, waiting for her? With a shaky hand, she pushed the key into the lock.

Chapter 2

Julie stepped inside the dark restroom and blinked. Dim lights shone over a row of mirrors. As her eyes adjusted to the meager light, her heart sank. She'd been misled. Santa really had been teasing her. He had no intention of meeting her here at all.

Julie chastised herself for being an idiot. She'd surely become fodder for jokes in the mail room come Monday. Maybe she really was the country bumpkin Nina thought she was. She sighed heavily and pulled the door open.

"What took you so long?"

Julie froze in place. Santa's voice sounded much deeper than it had in the noisy cafeteria. His silky voice echoed off the walls of the restroom. Her body quivered.

"Close the door," he said.

Julie let the door close and whirled around, pressing her back against it.

"You didn't answer my question." She could tell he was moving toward her. Her body quivered in anticipation yet her heart thundered with fear. "What took you so long?"

"I waited until my friends left," she said nervously. "I didn't want them to know."

"You didn't want them to know what?" She could feel his breath on her face as he spoke and she could smell his erotic spicy scent.

"That I was meeting you."

He chuckled softly. "Tell the truth," he said. His hands settled on her hips, gently pulling her toward him. "You didn't want them to know just how twisted you are."

His hands gently massaged her hips as his breath fanned the side of her neck. Julie tried to keep her wits about her. "I'm not twisted," she replied breathlessly.

She gasped when she felt his tongue slide against her throat. "Oh yes, you are," he said softly. "You wished for Santa to fuck you."

Santa had twisted her words. But she struggled to find the words to argue. Her body ached for the feel of his lips.

"Not the real Santa," she said, her voice coming in short gasps. "I just want you."

And he did not disappoint. His hands cupped her buttocks and pulled her against his steely body. She gasped when she felt his rock-hard cock through the ridiculous red suit. She'd have laughed if it hadn't been for his lips scorching a trail from her neck to her lips. There was no mistaking the silent demand his mouth made and she parted her lips. The moment his tongue swept inside, Julie knew she was lost. Her body went weak as she tried to return the heart-melting kiss he was giving her.

Suddenly she felt the zipper on the back of her dress whiz down. He slowly peeled her out of it, letting it fall to the swell of her hips. And then he released her bra. Her nipples immediately pebbled as the cool air touched them.

His hand closed over one breast. "Nice," he said softly. "Soft and perky, just how I imagined your tits would be."

When he dipped his head and took a nipple in his mouth, Julie's body jolted with fire. But the scratchy fake beard was annoying as it scraped over her heated skin.

Julie reached up and attempted to tear the beard from his face. He suddenly pulled away, taking several steps back. She blinked, feeling cold and vulnerable. Her arms went up to cover her breasts as she stared at him. "Scott? Are you okay?"

He cocked his head to one side. She wished she could see his eyes but the dim light kept them blanketed. She heard him take a deep breath and let it out slowly. He stood silently as he pulled the Santa hat off his head and then pulled the fake beard from his face.

As he tossed them on the floor, he unbuttoned the bright red coat and let it slide over his shoulders. Julie could see the crisp white dress shirt he wore beneath the Santa coat as he walked back to her. "Yeah, I'm okay," he said. "In fact, I'm better than I ever thought possible."

His sheer strength took Julie's breath away as he pulled her arms away from her breasts. His head tilted and she saw his tongue lick his lips as he examined her closely. Suddenly unsure of what she'd gotten herself into, she'd have covered herself again if he hadn't been holding her arms so firmly.

All reservations left her mind when he dipped his head and took one ripe nipple in his mouth. His hands cupped her breasts, gently kneading, as his hot tongue laved her. When his mouth left one nipple and settled on the other, his hands slid down over her waist. She gasped when he forced her dress over her hips.

For a moment, reality stepped in to visit her brain. She inwardly moaned as she heard the fabric tear. The dress had cost her more than her budget could afford and now, this man, a damn bicycle messenger, had ruined it by not unzipping it all the way.

He suddenly took his mouth off her and stepped back. She blinked while he slowly pulled his shirt off. Her eyes followed his every move. She gasped when his hands went to his belt buckle and then pushed his pants and underwear off. He kicked out of them, sending his shoes flying across the restroom. While she was unable to see his face clearly, the dim light seemed to highlight his massive ripe cock. It stood at full attention, jutting forward like a proud warrior ready to wage war.

Julie felt as weak as a kitten when he stepped forward again, this time pulling her panties and nylons off. He wadded them in his hand and tossed them on the floor, almost as if he'd tossed the gauntlet, a challenge for her to duel with him.

Julie's heartbeat quickened. She resented his attitude. Did this guy expect to dominate her?

I don't fucking think so!

In a show of defiance, Julie braced her legs together when he stepped toward her. She glared up at him as his mouth closed over hers. His kiss reached into her very soul and Julie struggled not to give in to him. But she knew she was lost the second he cupped her buttocks and pulled her against him. Suddenly he picked her up and deposited her on the cold marble counter. Her head fell back against the mirror as he pried her legs apart and wrapped them around his waist.

His hands closed over her nipples again, rubbing, massaging, and pinching. Then one of his hands snaked away, slowly sliding over her belly and to her core. When his fingers slid over her clit, Julie felt nothing more than an intrusion. Much the way she felt when the man she once thought she loved touched her.

But she suddenly knew this touch was different. It was soft at first, stroking lightly until moisture pooled. As he continued to stroke her clit, she felt her body begin to heat. The fact he teased her slit made her moan with need. She braced her hands on the edge of the counter and opened her legs wider, urging his fingers to deepen their exploration.

"Put your legs up on my shoulders," he said softly as his fingers continued to stroke her. She didn't hesitate at the demand. "Yeah," he said as he leaned over her. "That's it, babe."

Julie cried out when he slowly, gently pushed two fingers inside her. He twisted his fingers, massaging and then slowly pulled them out. As his hand pumped against her again and his thumb pressed on her swollen clit, she struggled to catch her breath. He set a rhythm...pushing his fingers far into her folds and then pulling them almost all the way out. Her hips bucked against his hand. She thought she might go mad as she gave herself up to him completely.

Her body jolted as she felt her climax approaching. No! She didn't want it to end so soon. She tried to keep the orgasm at bay but he kept up the relentless pace, pushing her to the brink.

"Stop!" she cried.

Suddenly, he leapt back, splaying his hands at his sides.
"Tell me what you want."

"I want you," she said.

Suddenly Julie was whisked off the counter. He picked her up, wrapping her legs around his waist, as he backed into one of the bathroom stalls. She gasped when he plunked down on the toilet. His cock throbbed against her belly as he pulled her down on top of him.

His placed his hands on either side of her face and pulled it down to him. His tongue slowly glided into her mouth, stroking softly. When he pulled back, his hands slid to her hips. "You want me?"

Julie nodded, unable to speak.

"Good," he said. "Fuck me."

Julie wasn't sure if she moved by her own volition or if she'd been lifted. All she knew was she braced her legs on either side of the toilet and lowered herself over his cock.

Julie wasn't a virgin. In fact, she'd fucked a few times before. But her pussy wasn't prepared for the massive cock that wanted to take her. Since she was in control, the second she felt herself stretch to accept the sheer girth of his cock, she pulled up, keeping him at bay.

His hands cupped her waist so when she attempted to push her pussy over his cock, he helped by pulling her down. But when she reluctantly pulled up again, he allowed it, though he let out a long sigh of frustration.

Her hands cupped his cheeks as she dipped her head and touched her lips to his. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't expect it to hurt so much."

He gazed up at her. "I understand," he said. "But I think you'll find it won't hurt so much after the initial penetration."

"But I'm afraid of the initial penetration," she said honestly.

He chuckled softly and kissed one of her nipples. "There's only one way to deal with this," he said softly. "We need to treat it the same way we would if you had to remove a Band-Aid from your knee. The faster you rip it off, the less pain it'll cause."

Julie frowned. "What are you talking about?"

He firmly gripped her hips and pulled her down over him with force. His cock embedded in her pussy, forcing itself up into her as far as it would go.

She gasped as he opened her wider than she ever thought possible, stretching her inner folds, forcing her to accept every bit of his massive cock.

"Damn." He whispered the word, as though he didn't mean for her to hear it. He ran his hands slowly up and down her back and buttocks. "See what I mean?"

Unable to speak, Julie could only nod. Her body felt as though it was being ripped in two for a moment. And then, as her pussy stretched to accommodate him, a passionate heat began to rise within her. It began at their connection and slowly ebbed its way through her body, to the top of her head and the tips of her toes.

When he began to move beneath her, a slow, gentle rock, she braced her hands on his shoulders preparing for what she knew would be the ride of her life.

She gasped when he added a small thrust to his rocking motion. His fingers continued to slide up and down her back as he smiled up at her. "You liked that, didn't you?"

She hated the smug smile on his lips but was powerless to say a word. Instead she dipped her head and opened her mouth over his. He quickly took control of the kiss, slowly darting his tongue in and out of her mouth. And then his hips matched the rhythm of his tongue, thrusting, retreating and thrusting again.

Julie tore her mouth from his as his cock continued to pound into her. Her hands left his shoulders as her head fell back. She held her arms over her head and rode him without the benefit of holding on. The floor felt cool beneath her feet as she continued to rock over him.

"Damn, I love your pussy," he said through gritted teeth. "So hot and tight. Don't think I'll ever get enough of you."

Suddenly he moved, scooping her up, and wrapping her legs around his waist as he burst through the bathroom stall door. Before her mind could register what was going on, he placed her ass on top of the marble countertop and pulled her legs up over his shoulders. He splayed his hands on either side of her as his cock filled her again. Julie winced as her core had to stretch again to accommodate him in this new position. But he was relentless, driving into her with a force she'd never known in her life.

"Here's a little something for you," he said through clenched teeth. She had no idea what he was talking about until his fingers touched her clit. With each thrust, his fingers stroked harder, driving her to the brink of insanity.

When she could take no more, her body began to convulse in sheer ecstasy. His moaned his release just as her own climax sucked her into sweet oblivion. He collapsed over her, bracing his hands on either side of her on the counter. His breathing was erratic as he gulped air into his lungs.

Julie wrapped her arms around his shoulders and held him close to her as her body continued to convulse. As her breathing slowed, she peered up at him. "That was amazing," she said softly.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "It was," he said.

He moved away and began gathering his clothes. He kept his back turned to her as he quickly dressed.

Julie frowned as she slowly got off the counter. "Scott?"

When he was fully dressed, he gathered her scattered clothes and placed them on the counter beside her. "Put your clothes on," he said. "I'll call a cab to take you home."

Julie felt a cold dagger slice into her heart as he walked toward the door. As he pulled the restroom door open, he glanced back at her. "And, by the way, I'm not Scott."

Chapter 3

"So how was it?"

Julie glanced at her boss as she sorted through the Monday morning mail. "How was what?"

"The clean up after the Christmas party Friday night," Nina said.

"Oh. Uhm, yeah, it was okay." Julie wiped bleary eyes and stifled a yawn as she continued to sort through the hundreds of letters that had arrived over the weekend.

"So you helped clean up and got home safely."

Julie shot her boss an annoyed look. "That's why I stayed after you left," she said. "And yes, I took a cab home."

"At three in the morning?" Nina said.

Julie stopped working and gazed at her boss. Before she could ask, Nina quickly explained, "My brother was driving the cab."

Julie's eyes narrowed. "You should tell your brother to fix his watch. It was closer to two than three."

Nina shrugged. "Whatever." She cocked her head to one side. "But the party was over at eleven. Why did the clean up take so long?"

Julie threw her hands up over her head. "Why do I have to explain myself to you? It's not like you're my mother."

Nina backed away, splaying her hands. "Hey, I was just concerned. Don't chew my head off."

Julie knew her boss was only looking out for her. But she'd spent the past two days beating herself up for being such an idiot. Whoever it was she'd had sex with on Friday night had

discarded her and left her feeling like a slut. And, to make matters worse, Julie couldn't get him out of her mind. His touch, his voice...and oh lord, his gigantic cock.

Julie backed away from her sorting station. "I'm taking my break," she said.

Nina called after Julie as she headed toward the door. "It's eight thirty. You've only been here half an hour."

"So I won't take a break at ten," Julie said over her shoulder as she pushed through the swinging doors and made a beeline for the stairwell. She needed to get out of there for a few minutes. She had to gather her thoughts.

She climbed the steps two at a time, anxious to get out of the building. She burst through the back door and stood in the alley, trying to calm her frazzled nerves. Julie pressed her back against the cool cement wall and tried to catch her breath.

How could she have been so stupid? How could she have thought meeting the mysterious man in the executive restroom was a good idea?

She'd been asking herself the same question all weekend. Julie pressed her hand over her eyes. While she'd been certain Santa was Scott, the bicycle messenger, she kept replaying the last words he'd said before he left the restroom. I'm not Scott.

The pronouncement came with a certain measure of relief. Scott had been hitting on her for months and she regretted that a few glasses of wine found her drooling over the Santa she was so sure was him.

Still, Julie asked herself the same question she'd been torturing herself with all weekend. Who was Santa? Just who had she had sex with?

Julie was in the middle of beating herself up again when she felt her cell phone vibrate in the front pocket of her jeans. When she hauled it out and glanced at the caller ID, she groaned. Not now.

Julie hit the talk button and pressed the phone to her ear. "Hey, Rob," she said weakly.

"Hi, Jules," he said. "I was talking to your mom and dad yesterday and they didn't know when you'd be home for Christmas."

Julie winced. "Rob—"

"Before you say anything," he said, cutting her off, "I just want you to know that I'm ready to make a commitment. We'll announce our engagement at your parents' on Christmas Day."

Julie struggled to keep the urge to scream at bay. Why now? Why would Rob suddenly decide he wanted to marry her after she'd spent the past five years of her life wishing he'd finally pop the question? She'd moved on, damn it. Being a small-town doctor's wife no longer appealed to her.

The fact was, if Rob had called her before she'd gone to the Diamond Industries' party, she might have accepted his proposal. But sex with Rob had always been somewhat boring. She went through the motions but only because she felt she had to.

Three nights ago, Julie discovered just how exciting sex could be. Granted, she wasn't sure who she'd had sex with

but oh, her body still sizzled at the thought of what she and the mystery man had done together. She may never know who he was but Julie knew one thing, she'd never settle for anything less than mind-numbing, explosive sex again.

"I haven't made any decisions about Christmas yet," she said. "I'll only have a couple days off so it hardly seems worth the four-hour drive to get there."

"Even if it means we can announce our engagement?" Rob asked.

Too little, too late. "I'm not sure what I want anymore," she said honestly. "I need some time to think about it."

When Rob protested, Julie quickly ended the call. She shut her cell phone off and tucked it into her pocket.

Julie pressed her head against the cold bricks and closed her eyes. If only she knew what she really wanted. Days ago, Rob's offer of marriage would have excited her. She'd have quickly dumped her life in Toronto and run home to him. Now, everything had changed. Julie had had a taste of what could be. Even if she never met Santa again, she knew there was so much more out there for her.

* * * *

Max strummed his fingers on the massive oak desk impatiently. The petite blond with soulful blue eyes had been on his mind since he'd had sex with her on Friday night after the Christmas party. That long wavy hair which looked like spun gold, those incredible blue eyes which mirrored every emotion she was feeling. He'd loved everything about her, from her small perky tits to her narrow waist and tight pussy.

He wasn't sure when he'd ever enjoyed sex more than he had with her.

The fact he'd never asked her name didn't seem so bad at first. After all, there were several women he'd fucked over the years whose names didn't matter.

Still, he regretted treating her like a slut afterward. He may well be a cad for the most part but even those whose names he never did get had the benefit of his holding them close for a little while after. The fact was he hadn't expected to be so deeply affected by this woman...and he didn't like it one bit. Max didn't have relationships with women that went beyond carnal needs.

But this one was different. He wanted to see her again; he wanted to fuck her again...and again and again.

In fact, he soon regretted not getting her name. He had a hard-on again within an hour and wished he hadn't dumped her so quickly. Shit! Who knew he'd want her again?

Determined to find her, he put his personal secretary on the job. The older woman was clearly none too pleased with her assignment.

"How am I supposed to find her if you don't even know her name?"

"I don't know."

Ethel's brows rose over her glasses but she made no comment. "Are you sure she works for Diamond Industries?"

"She wouldn't have been at the Christmas party if she didn't," he said impatiently. All employees had to show their ID cards at the door before they could get into the party.

"I've given you the woman's description, that's all I've got."

Ethel sniffed indignantly. "This would be a lot easier if you'd asked her name."

Max sighed. "Look, Ethel—"

She raised her hand and stopped him in mid-sentence. "No need to explain, Mr. Diamond. Don't forget that I've worked for your father for thirty years."

Max winced. "Am I just like my old man?"

Ethel rose from her chair. "Not just like him," she said as she walked to the door. "Your father built a multimillion dollar empire while he screwed around."

Max sighed as his secretary closed the office door behind her. How had it come to this point? At thirty-two, what did he have to show for himself? He hadn't earned the post of vice president, he'd landed it when his father retired and Zachary moved up to president. And no one, not even Ethel, expected much from him. After all, he was the n'er do well son, the one most likely to screw up. While his father and his second oldest brother engulfed themselves in the Diamond Industry Empire, Max was busy finding women to fuck.

That said, something happened to him when he walked out of the executive restroom two nights ago. Rather than putting another proverbial notch on his bedpost, he found himself thinking about her all the time. Her scent lingered in his mind; the memory of her soft skin and silky long hair kept him awake at night. He longed to feel her hands on him; to shove his cock into her moist depths again and to hear her soft gasps when he fucked her.

Max wasn't sure how long he'd been sitting at his desk when Ethel burst back into his office. Steely grey eyes glared down at him while she stood primly at the edge of his desk.

"I've come up empty," she said briskly. "There are a lot of women in this building who match the description you gave me. I need something more to go on."

"Scott."

"Pardon me?"

"She called me Scott. Does that help?"

Ethel rolled her eyes and plunked down on one of the chairs near his desk. "Yes, it helps," she said. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

Max shrugged. "Didn't think of it before."

"The only Scott I know working for Diamond Industries is a bicycle messenger. He works out of the mail room. He'll probably know who she is."

Max winced when his old secretary's bones cracked as she started to get up from the chair. "I'll go to the mail room now—"

"No, I'll go." Max shot up from his chair. "Hold my calls."

Ethel snorted as he headed for the office door. "Not like you'll get any calls. Everyone knows you're a layabout."

Max turned and glared at his secretary. "I resent that."

She rolled her eyes but made no apologies. "I'm sure you do. The truth hurts."

To hell with the old broad anyway. Max was on a mission. He stepped into the hall and hesitated.

Ethel sighed loudly. "Go left. Pass the main elevators and go to the end of the hall. There's a freight elevator that goes to the basement."

Max smiled sheepishly. "I probably should have known that."

Ethel waved her hand as if she was dismissing an overindulged child. "Whatever. Just go."

"Thanks."

When she bowed her head and placed her hand over her eyes, Max felt a pang of guilt. He expected she felt like she was being punished for being his personal secretary after thirty years of loyal service. She probably wondered on a daily basis what she'd done to deserve being the secretary of Edward Diamond's youngest son.

Max quelled the urge to go back into his office and assure Ethel that he'd change. Fact was, Max wasn't so sure he actually could change. Life was too damn short to give much of it up to actual work.

* * * *

"Hey, babe."

Julie looked up from her workstation to find Scott standing over her. She took a step back and looked him up and down. Dressed in skintight bright yellow spandex that hid absolutely nothing and the matching helmet accentuated his long face. And oh lord, his needle-nose, long narrow, and pointy, would be the envy of Woody Woodpecker.

How could she have thought Santa was in fact Scott, the man who considered himself God's gift to women?

Yep, she'd most certainly had too much to drink at the Christmas party.

Julie took a deep breath as she turned back to her table. She kept her eyes trained on her work as she replied, "Hi."

"Been away a few days," he said. "Did you miss me?"

"No, can't say I did," she replied.

Scott ran his hand over her back and settled it on her butt. He managed to get a good squeeze in before Julie slapped his hand away. "Oh come on," he said. "How can you resist taking a ride on the Scottmobile?"

The other women in the mail room started to laugh, at first it was soft snickering and then it became all-out, grab-your-belly laughter. Scott glared at them. "Mind your own fucking business," he said through clenched teeth. "This conversation is between my goddess and me."

Nina stepped forward. While she continued to snicker, she quickly closed the distance between herself and Scott. "Look here..." she gazed at his bright yellow skintight outfit and struggled to keep her laughter at bay, "you sorry excuse for a canary—"

Scott frowned. "Who the fuck do you think you are?"

Nina flattened her hand on his chest. "You know who I am," she said tightly. "And you're nothing more than a messenger boy. So I suggest you get off your high horse. One word from me and you're out on your ass."

Scott snorted. "Says who? Go ahead, report me. It's not like anything will come of it."

"You're fired."

Julie was still trying to take in the exchange between her boss and Scott when another voice entered the mix. This one was deep and rich and oh, maybe a bit more familiar than Julie wanted to admit.

Maxwell Diamond stood just inside the mail room. He stood perfectly still, his shoulder resting on the doorjamb. With his arms folded over his chest, he looked magnificently confident as his dark brown eyes lazily washed over Scott.

There was a collective gasp in the mail room when he pushed off the doorjamb and walked inside. Each step he took was filled with confidence; his deep brown gaze focused on Scott.

Scott sputtered. "Excuse me, Mr. Diamond," he said humbly. "I have to get to work."

Maxwell held out his hand, halting Scott. His eyes leveled on Scott and his face turned to stone. "I believe I just fired you."

"But, sir..."

"I'll notify HR," he said, referring to the human resources department. "You can pick up your severance package tomorrow."

Scott's pale face puckered but he said nothing. Everyone in the mail room watched him walk out. When the door closed behind him, the staff cheered...all except Nina and Julie.

Julie quickly turned back to her sorting table but kept her ears pricked as Nina approached Maxwell Diamond.

"Well, well," the buxom middle-aged woman said. "In my twenty years as supervisor of the mail room, this is the first time any Diamond has stepped foot into the basement."

"That's all about to change," Maxwell Diamond said.

Nina snorted loudly. "Why? The mail room has always been considered the asshole of Diamond Industries. Needed but no one wants to admit it exists."

Everyone in the mail room laughed. Max's rich laughter sank into Julie's soul. She couldn't help but turn to see her boss and Maxwell Diamond go head to head.

"Very good," he said. "I probably had that coming."

He closed the distance between himself and her boss and carefully fingered her name tag. "Nina Portias." He said her name as if committing it to memory.

Nina was a tall woman yet she was forced to look up at him. If she was uncomfortable with Maxwell Diamond's close proximity, she certainly didn't let it show. "What brings you here?"

Maxwell smiled and backed away. His eyes slowly scanned the room. "Thought it was about time I checked out the mail room," he said as he began to wander around the small room. Julie's breath caught when he stopped in mid-stride. She kept her eyes trained on her work as she slowly sorted the morning mail and placed it into the slots over her workstation. "It's dark in here," he said. "Turn on a few more lights."

"Every light we have is on, Mr. Diamond," Nina said. "I've asked for more lighting but my requests have always been ignored."

Julie froze when Maxwell Diamond stepped closer to her. Her body felt electric when he leaned over her shoulder. "How can you see what you're doing?"

Oh my God. Julie went completely numb. Her heart thundered in her chest. That voice, that incredible, soft, sultry, gravelly voice. She'd heard it whisper in her ear just two nights ago.

As Julie attempted to pick up a bundle of papers, her fingers fumbled, letting them fall on the floor in front of her.

"If I may answer your question, Mr. Diamond," Nina interrupted, "the lighting in the mail room has been an issue for a long time. No one in the executive offices seems to care."

"Then I'm glad I came," he said. As Julie moved to pick up the spilled letters, Maxwell gave her a tiny pat on her ass. "Butterfingers," he said softly.

Julie almost fell on the floor. The pat on her ass was one thing but his soft voice, meant for only her to hear, just about drove her over the edge. She blindly began to gather the scattered mail.

"So what are you going to do about it?" Nina demanded.

"Maybe it's time Diamond Industries made a difference in the lives of all their staff."

Since Maxwell had afforded her some distance, she was able to clear her mind enough to pick up all the scattered mail and place it on her workstation. She breathed a sigh of relief when she managed to turn her attention back to her work.

"Fair words," Nina replied. "But what are you willing to do to make our lives better?"

"The first thing I want is an advocate from the mail room," Max said.

Nina frowned but she was clearly interested. "I'm listening."

"I think your voice won't be heard unless you insist on it. We need someone willing to speak up. Someone willing to rattle cages until you get what you want."

Julie was amazed that everyone in the mail room clapped and shouted in agreement. How could they so easily be duped by Maxwell Diamond's words? The guy had no intention of helping them. In fact, he probably thought his visit to the mail room could be written off on his taxes as charity. Yet, everyone seemed so taken in.

Nina smiled broadly. "I like you, Maxwell Diamond. Maybe we finally have found someone who will make our jobs easier."

Maxwell's thousand-watt smile blinded Julie as he responded, "I'm glad you appreciate my efforts. I want to help."

Julie's mind reeled. She could not rein herself in any longer. "Give me a break!" she said. When the room suddenly went silent, she looked at each of her coworkers and finally settled her gaze on her boss. "Nina," she began, "I've worked here for two years and this is the first time anyone from the executive offices has ever visited."

Nina frowned. "I think it's a good thing the VP of Diamond has taken the time to visit the mail room."

"Yes, it is," Julie replied. "But—"

Nina quickly cut her off. "But nothing. Why would you take issue with our finally being noticed for all the hard work we do down here?"

Julie's heart pounded in her throat. She didn't want to alienate her boss but she wasn't so sure Maxwell could be trusted to follow through on the promises he was making to them. "Nina," she began, her mind searching for a way to soothe her boss' anger. "I don't mean to—"

This time, Maxwell cut her off. "Since it seems Julie can't decide whether I'm a friend or a foe, maybe she's the best choice to be the mail room advocate."

Everyone agreed before Julie could find her voice. She blinked while Maxwell reached to shake her hand. "I expect you to be in my office first thing tomorrow morning with your report."

Julie frowned as she gazed at him, still not sure what she was signed on for.

As his hand continued to hold hers, he leaned in and whispered into her ear, "Ho, ho, ho."

Julie's throat tightened as reality sank into her numb brain. Maxwell Diamond was Santa? As he released her hand and walked out of the mail room, Julie's knees went weak. If she didn't sit down soon, she'd most certainly fall down. She wasn't sure if she asked for help or if Nina saw her go pale. Either way, a chair was quickly brought to her and Julie gratefully sank into it.

"Are you okay?" Nina asked anxiously.

No, she wasn't okay. In fact she wasn't sure she'd ever be okay again. Sure, she'd admired Maxwell Diamond from afar. And yes, she'd had fantasies about having him in her bed. But holy shit.

"Water," Julie said breathlessly. "I need some water."

When Nina pressed a cool bottle of water into her hand, Julie pressed it against her feverish forehead before she tipped it to her lips.

As she gasped air into her lungs, Nina took the bottle from her hand. "I think we better talk in my office," she said.

"Okay," Julie replied. "Just give me a minute." But Nina's cool hand pulled Julie from the chair and quickly led her to the office. "Or better yet," Julie said as she was being dragged along, "I could go with you right now."

Julie winced when the office door slammed behind her and Nina rounded her small desk and sat down. "You fucked him, didn't you?"

Julie blinked. "Who?"

Nina's brows knit together. She was clearly very unhappy. "You know who I mean," she said through clenched teeth. "You fucked Maxwell Diamond. That's why you stayed after the party last Friday. You weren't sticking around to help clean up. He got to you."

Julie wasn't sure how to reply. Her mind whirled. "I was turned when I sat on his lap. I had no idea who he was." When Nina rolled her eyes, Julie quickly added, "I swear, I thought he was Scott."

"Scott?" Nina blinked as if she had no idea who Julie was talking about.

"You know...Scott. The bicycle messenger Maxwell Diamond fired a few minutes ago."

Nina's face fell. She looked appalled. "That guy is nothing less than a sleaze and you know it," she said. "He's always given me the creeps so I'm glad he's fired. But if you thought

Scott was playing Santa, why in the hell did you stick around?"

Julie's hands flew to her cheeks. "I don't know! Maybe I had too much to drink. And, well, it's been awhile. Maybe I was just plain horny."

Nina shook her head. "I'm still trying to get my head around the fact you thought Santa was anyone other than Maxwell Diamond. It was common knowledge he was taking the role this year."

Julie was tired of having to defend herself. "Well, maybe I didn't get the memo," she said angrily.

"All right," Nina said calmly. "Maybe you didn't know. But having that jackass show up in my mail room has opened a big can of worms."

Tell me about it. "So what if he found me?" she asked. "It's not like the guy will want more from me than he already got."

Nina shook her head. "Even if he isn't interested in another roll in the hay, he came looking for you."

"So what?"

"So now he wants a daily report from the mail room," Nina said. "The mail room has always been considered beneath any of the Diamond men. I've been allowed to run it as I see fit."

Julie frowned. "But there are a lot of problems in the mail room. The poor lighting, the ventilation could be a lot better. It gets so musty—"

"We've managed just fine all these years," Nina said, cutting her off. "And now you've drawn the attention of one of the Diamond clan."

"I'm not crazy about it but you have to admit, it's about time some changes were made down here."

"Is it? Everyone knows he's Edward Diamond's spoiled youngest son. He's never lifted a finger to prove his worth yet he somehow managed to become vice president."

Julie was becoming quite annoyed with her boss. Who was she to trash Maxwell Diamond? "Okay, so what's your point?"

"My point is this," Nina said, "If his dick wasn't on full alert, he never would have found his way down here. He's as useless as tits on a bull. He's not going to do a damn thing for us. He's after you. If you reporting to him on a daily basis is what it'll take to keep him out of my hair, I'm fine with it. "

Julie suddenly understood. She'd just become a sacrificial lamb.

Chapter 4

"What the hell are you up to?" Edward Diamond said through clenched dentures.

"Good morning, Dad," Max said as he reclined in his leather chair and smiled.

"Don't take that tone with me," Edward said angrily. He braced his hands on Max's massive oak desk and glared at him. "I heard you've been to the mail room."

"That's right."

"You fired some messenger boy."

Max nodded. "Yep."

"Heard something about you designating someone to be a mail room advocate."

Max nodded again. "You heard right."

His father's face reddened. "Who the hell are you to make decisions like that?"

Max leaned forward and picked up the name plate on his desk. "Well, let me see," he said as he dusted it with the cuff of his bright white shirt. He turned it to show his father. "Yep, that's me. Maxwell Diamond, Vice President of Diamond Industries."

Edward ripped the name plate from Max's hand and slammed it on the desk. "Fuck your title," the old man said vehemently. "You've always been a layabout. Why are you changing now?"

Max frowned. Sure he'd never had the drive his two older brothers had but no one ever expected anything from him. Alex, the oldest Diamond son, rebelled against his father's

demands and left the fold to buy a ranch in Manitoba. He'd been so determined to make it on his own that he'd lost touch with his family until he'd come home for his father's eightieth birthday. Edward's personal administrative assistant ended up losing her job after she'd lost track of her boss' wayward young wife. Alex quickly hired her to work her administrative magic on his ranch and promptly fell in love with her.

Zachary, Edward's son from his second marriage, was everything Max would never be. In spite of the fact Edward left Zach's mother when he was barely walking, Zach grew to have an instinct for business. When he was old enough, Edward quickly pulled him into the Diamond Industry fold where he went on to do great things. Zach fell in love with his long-time friend, a woman he'd thought was gay until he dragged her to Alex's wedding.

And then there was Max, the product of Edward's third marriage. When his father left Max's mother for a younger woman, Max was two years old. He had no memories of his father taking any part in his life. But Max did remember that the old man provided well for both him and his mother. Max lacked for nothing in his life, had never felt the need to lift a finger to do anything for himself. The money was always there.

At nineteen, his mother was killed in a car accident and out of the blue, Edward Diamond appeared. The old man was determined to drag his wayward son into the family business. Max didn't care, in fact he embraced it. Women considered him sexier when he claimed a part in the multimillion dollar

Diamond dynasty. In return, Max was expected to show up every day and pretend he actually worked.

And so, he had no reason to be hurt by his father's remark that he was a layabout. And he'd have been very happy to remain that way if it hadn't been for the sweet little vixen he'd lured to the executive restroom the night of the company Christmas party. Just thinking about her made his cock swell and ache with need. But shit, he could hardly tell his father that.

"Maybe it's time for me to take some interest in the biz," Max said. "I've realized I haven't been fair to either you or Zach."

Edward's grey brows knit low over his eyes but he said nothing, giving Max free rein to continue.

"You're going to be eighty-one in a few months. I know you want to retire. And you should...you've earned it. But Zach can't run Diamond Industries alone. He needs help and I figure it's time for me to be there for him."

Edward blinked. Clearly, he wasn't convinced. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Okay," he said, "have your mail room advocate. But when Zach gets back, he has the right to veto it."

Max watched the old man lumber out of his office. When the door closed behind his father, Max raised his hand and punched the air triumphantly. He'd won.

Sure, Zach would probably put a stop to it when he returned but until then, Julie, a Christmas present to himself, would have to walk into his office every morning.

Max leaned back in his chair and checked his watch. She was due with her report any minute now. His cock hardened in anticipation.

He felt only a twinge of guilt about giving his best performance to date for his father. Edward was left wondering. Perhaps even hoping Max had finally come around and would be a benefit to the family empire.

Max's body went cool for a moment. It would be a cold day in Hell before he'd ever consider taking any kind of meaningful role at Diamond Industries.

Max glared at the name plate on his desk.

Maxwell Diamond, Vice President.

What a fucking lark. Did the old man really think giving Max the vice presidency would change anything?

There was no title his father could bestow and no amount of money his father could throw at him that would make up for the old man's not having been around in his youth.

* * * *

"You must be Miss Thornton," the older woman said as she rounded her desk outside of Maxwell's office. She smiled as she extended her hand in a warm greeting.

Julie nodded numbly. Unable to sleep the night before, her head felt woozy, and her nerves were on edge. Now that she'd actually walked into the vice president's office, Julie wasn't sure she'd be able to go through with the meeting.

"I'm Ethel," the older woman said as she released Julie's hand and turned back to her desk. "Mr. Diamond's been expecting you. Go right in."

Julie clutched a folder under her arm as she looked around the extravagant office...a far cry from the dingy, dimly lit mail room she worked in five days a week. She looked around the grandiose space. When her eyes leveled on the blood-red leather sofa, she finally found her voice. "Nice."

"Yes," Ethel replied with a certain measure of humor in her voice. "Maxwell Diamond demands only the best." After a short pause, she added, "I expect that's why you're here."

Julie's throat constricted as she whirled around to look at the woman. "What is that supposed to mean?" she demanded.

Ethel looked shocked at first and then knowingly amused. "Nothing at all," she said as her eyes washed over Julie.

"Please go in. Mr. Diamond's waiting for your...err...report."

"I don't know what you've heard," Julie said breathlessly. "I'm here as an advocate for the people who work in the mail room. We've been ignored for far too long."

Ethel grinned as she waved her hand toward the office door. "Good. You have my blessing. Give 'im hell."

Julie's cheeks flushed as she walked to the office door. She fully intended to make Maxwell Diamond listen to each and every one of the complaints in the folder under her arm. She would not allow the fact she'd had sex with the Diamond Industries' VP to affect her...to waver her from the course she'd been set on. No way. Her coworkers needed someone to speak for them...someone with the nerve to finally stand up for what they deserved.

Julie hesitated at the door. Should she knock first? Would it be rude to just open the door and barge in?

Ethel's light chuckle grated on Julie's already frayed nerves. "Just walk in."

The secretary was a little too smug for Julie's liking. She quelled the urge to tell the old woman what she could do to herself. Instead, she took a deep breath as her hand settled on the cool brass doorknob. She let her breath out slowly and twisted the knob. When she pushed the door open, she walked into the office, holding her head high, hoping she looked confident.

With the shades drawn over the massive windows, the office was dark and, Julie had to admit, filled with a sense of foreboding. Any confidence she felt quickly dissipated as she closed the door behind her. She blinked in the dim light. "Mr. Diamond?"

"Take a seat."

The words were said sharply yet there was a twinge of Santa's voice. That deep, rich voice which permeated her very soul as she gave herself to him. Julie's body tingled at the memory. She tried desperately to push the erotic thoughts from her mind as she blindly stepped forward, holding out her hands until they finally rested on the seat he wanted her to take. Still clutching the folder under her arm, Julie sat down.

Suddenly a lamp on his desk flickered and illuminated the room. While his form remained in dim light, his arm stretched out over the desk. "Give me the list of demands," he said.

Julie clutched the folder to her chest. "I'm not so sure I should do that, Mr. Diamond. My job is to go over the list with you."

The air in the room grew cold as he took an audible breath and let it out slowly. Julie's body quaked...the urges she felt at that moment would make a great porn flick. Angry sex...deep, penetrating, no-denying-him sex. Every fiber of her being suddenly craved it. She thought of his enormous cock and how it damn near ripped her in two. And yet, her body craved him...wanted him again.

"Give me the folder," he demanded.

She quickly tossed the folder onto the desk. When he reached for it, a sense of self-loathing washed over her. It was only a matter of time before everyone in the mail room was fired. She'd let them all down. Why? Because she'd become a slave to Maxwell Diamond. A man who had probably already moved on after their encounter. Yet a man she would never be able to get out of her mind...or her heart.

Maxwell gripped the folder in his hands but did not open it. His next words shocked her. "Tell your coworkers that each and every one of their demands will be met."

Julie blinked. Okay. The guy was playing her for a fool. "How can you make a promise like that? You haven't even read what's in the folder."

"Because you are my advocate. Give me what I want and your friends in the mail room will benefit."

Julie's mouth went dry. "You don't even know what they are demanding."

"No," he said. "But I expect it's something simple. People willing to do menial tasks never require much."

Julie bristled. "Excuse me? I happen to be one of those people."

"And we appreciate your efforts," he replied sardonically. "Where would a company like Diamond Industries be if it weren't for the people willing to do those little jobs no one ever gives any thought to?"

Is this guy for real? Could anyone be more arrogant? Julie struggled to keep herself in check as she got up from the chair. "I suggest you go over the list of demands very carefully," she said stiffly. She couldn't resist adding, "The little people in the mail room would really appreciate it."

As Julie turned to leave, his voice halted her steps. "I've already told you they'll get what they want."

Julie looked over her shoulder. "Yes, so you said. But this isn't a game, Mr. Diamond. And I won't be your pawn."

As she pulled the door open, his words brought her to a stop. "And what about your wish to have a Diamond for Christmas?"

Julie's heart pounded in her throat. She hoped her voice didn't waver as she replied, "I'll be in tomorrow morning with my daily report. I'm sure you'll have had ample time to go over the material by then."

Chapter 5

"I'm a little tired of waiting for a definite answer," Rob said angrily. "Your parents are expecting us to make our engagement official on Christmas Day. So either shit or get off the fucking pot!"

In all the years she'd known Rob, he'd never talked to her that way. And she didn't like it one bit. After the week she'd endured, she was in no mood to deal with Rob. "You're a smart man. Surely you know my hesitation says it all."

She simply did not have the patience to deal with Rob right now. It was Friday night, and she'd gone four days with no contact from Maxwell Diamond. True to her word as mail room advocate, she went back to his office after their initial meeting only to have his secretary make excuses for him. He wasn't in yet, he was tied up in a meeting and so on.

Yeah, right. The truth was Julie was a complete failure. Even Nina had said so, just not in so many words. She'd let the mail room workers down.

"All I got from your hesitation is you're afraid to make a commitment. It's a big step but I'm ready," Rob said, injecting his words into her deep thoughts.

"When I wanted to get married, you always had reasons not to," Julie countered. "Why now? We can wait a little longer, can't we?"

"Sure. Or we could wait until the next time the moon turns blue," Rob said sarcastically.

Even though she knew he wasn't serious, Julie was okay with that.

"Look, Julie," Rob said softly, "I love you and I want to make a life with you. I know I was hesitant before but now that you're so damn far away, I realize how much I miss you. Come home for Christmas—"

Beep, beep.

"...marry me..."

Beep, beep.

"—I'll make you happy—"

Beep, beep.

"Uhm, Rob, I'm sorry but I have an incoming call. I've got to put you on hold..."

"No! Don't put me on hold," Rob said anxiously. "We have to work this out—"

Click.

"Hello?"

"Ho ho ho."

Julie's heart constricted as her mouth went dry. "Why are you calling me at home?"

"I want to go over the details of the demands from the mail room," he replied in his rich, deep voice.

"It's Friday night," she said. "It'll have to wait until Monday."

"Nonsense," he replied. "I've reserved a table at Chez Louise for dinner. Wear the dress you had on..." he hesitated and chuckled softly. "Or I should say, the one I tore off you after the Christmas party."

"I really don't think—"

"I'll pick you up in front of your building at seven. Don't be late or I might have to spank you."

Julie felt numb when the line went dead. She held the phone to her ear as her mind whirled. Beep, beep. She couldn't wear the dress she'd worn for the Diamond Christmas party. Max had ripped the seams when he tore it off her and she had not yet fixed it.

She knew she should avoid him, hide in her apartment and pretend he didn't exist. But her body ached at the thought of seeing him again.

Beep, beep.

Still, she feared being consumed whole. Maxwell Diamond was a notorious lover...and worse than that, he was a notorious leaver. Was she sure she wanted to take that step, especially when she knew how it would turn out?

Beep, beep.

If only she could make her body listen to her brain.

Julie was about to toss the phone aside when it beeped again. She suddenly remembered Rob was still on hold. Oops!

When she hit the button to bring him back, he breathed heavily into the phone. "What took you so long?" he asked angrily.

She couldn't deal with him tonight, especially now. "Look, Rob, it's been nice talking to you but I really have to go."

"Damn it, Jul—"

Julie hit the end call button and tossed the phone onto the sofa. Hearing Max on the phone made her body ache with need. She had to face facts. No matter how much she'd once hoped for a future with Rob, he'd never made her feel the way she did in Max's arms. Sure, she didn't know who he was at the time but she'd never felt so free to enjoy the act of

sex. Max had left her not just wanting more but needing more.

Yet, she was no fool. Julie knew he was toying with her and, he'd quickly move on when she bored him.

And Julie resented his arrogance. If he expected her to show up in...she checked her watch...less than an hour, he was sorely mistaken. She would not give in to his demands so easily.

She wandered to her bedroom, idly strumming her fingers over her lips. Still, it couldn't hurt to check her closet to see what she could wear for dinner at the very exclusive Chez Louise.

And then a thought struck her so hard it almost took her breath away. Poor Rob, he had no idea what she'd been up to since she landed in Toronto. After years of hoping he'd finally want to make a life with her, the fact he announced his intention now came at the very worst time in her life. She'd had a taste of something much more exciting. She knew she could never go back to Rob even though she'd probably never get another taste again.

Suddenly feeling weak, Julie sat down on the bed and tried to calm her nerves as her mind whirled. When she was on Santa's lap at the Christmas party, she'd wished for a Diamond for Christmas. Was it possible the powers that be misunderstood her wish? Was she destined to accept a diamond from Rob?

No. It couldn't be. Her wish was meant to be a Diamond in the flesh and it had most certainly been granted. After

experiencing sex with Maxwell Diamond, Julie knew she could never accept less.

Julie leapt from the bed and rifled through her closet. All right. Maybe she should have dinner with Max Diamond after all. But she'd wear what she wanted to wear, not what he demanded.

Julie grinned when she came across the perfect dress. Max might not approve but it was the festive season. Christmas was only a week away.

If he thought she'd conform to his wishes, he was about to find out that Julie Thornton wasn't about to be pushed around by anyone...not by Rob and certainly not by a Diamond.

* * * *

Max poured himself another scotch and soda. Where the fuck is she? Surely he hadn't been stood up.

Just as he lifted the crystal glass to his lips, the window between himself and the chauffeur rolled down. "We've been parked in front of Ms. Thornton's apartment building for almost half an hour, sir."

"I'm aware of the time, Geoffrey," Max replied sardonically.

"We'll miss your reservation at Chez Louise if we linger much longer," the chauffeur said matter-of-factly.

Biting back an oath, Max tipped the drink to his lips and took a long swallow. Geoffrey was merely pointing out facts. The long and short of it was that he, Maxwell Diamond, may well have been stood up for the first time in his life.

Max's patience was wearing thin. He imagined himself morphing into the Incredible Hulk and ripping the walls off the apartment building to find Julie.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "We'll wait a few more minutes."

"Very good, sir," Geoffrey replied before the window rolled back up.

Very good, sir. Very good, sir!

How many times had a chauffeur uttered those words to him over the years? More often than not, it was Geoffrey. The chauffeur had been with the Diamond family for years. Even though Edward dumped his mother when Max was a child, Geoffrey had been at Max's disposal since he was a kid. He had more childhood memories surrounding the old chauffeur than he did of his own father. Yet, Max realized, he knew nothing about the man.

Perhaps it was boredom that made Max press the button to lower the window between himself and Geoffrey. When the chauffeur's eyes gazed at him questioningly in the rearview mirror, Max wasn't sure what in the hell he was doing.

"Hey, Geoff," he began, not sure where he was going with it.

"Sir?"

Max sighed. "Don't call me sir," he said. "Call me..."

"Mr. Diamond?"

"No," Max said.

Geoffrey frowned. "When you were a child, I called you Master Diamond."

Max shook his head furiously. "No!"

The chauffeur blinked in the rearview mirror. "Then I don't know what you require of me, sir."

"Call me Max."

Bushy grey eyebrows rose over Geoffrey's wrinkle-framed brown eyes but he made no comment. "Would you like me to check on Ms. Thornton?"

Max knew what was keeping her. She was toying with him. She wasn't the first woman to pretend to resist him and she wouldn't be the last. It annoyed Max that Julie would play hard to get. He thought she was different, not into those stupid little games the society women he usually dated liked to play.

Max sighed as he reached for the handle of the limo door. "No, Geoffrey," he said, "I'll go after Ms. Thornton." As Max pushed the door open, he glanced at his watch. "Do me a favor, will you?"

"Of course, sir."

"Cancel the reservations at Chez Louise."

Geoffrey frowned. "That may not be necessary if Ms. Thornton—"

"Just cancel them," Max barked as he got out of the limo. He was about to walk up the steps to the apartment building when guilt got the better of him. He turned back and tapped on the driver's side window. When Geoffrey rolled the window down, Max bowed his head. "That was rude, I'm sorry," he said softly.

Geoffrey smiled. "Understood..." he hesitated and then added, "Max."

Max leaned against the limo, looking down at his driver. "It's this woman," he confided. "She drives me crazy."

Geoffrey chuckled. "Women will do that."

"She's not like the others. There's something different about her."

Geoffrey leaned back against the plush leather seat and took his cap off. After he tossed it on the seat beside him, he wiped his brow. "I met a woman like that once," he said. "I'd just come home from the Korean War. She drove me to the point of madness." Geoffrey glanced ahead of him, memories reflecting in his old eyes.

"What did you do?" Max asked.

"I did what any red-blooded man would do," Geoffrey replied. "I set about turning her life upside down."

Max chuckled. "So what became of her?"

Geoffrey grinned as he turned to look at Max. "We celebrated our fifty-second anniversary two months ago."

Damn! Max backed away from the limo. "That's not what's going on here," he said. "I barely know the woman and even so, I never tie myself down to one woman. Everyone knows that."

Geoffrey grabbed his hat and made a point of dusting it off before he placed it back on his head. "You asked."

"Yeah," Max replied. And I'm sorry I did. "I'll see what's keeping her."

Just as Max rounded the limo and approached the apartment building, the door opened and Julie appeared. Max couldn't take his eyes off her as she slowly walked down the steps to the sidewalk.

Dressed in a sleeveless red velvet dress, Julie looked absolutely stunning. The bodice of the dress was formfitting, skintight...there was no way she could be wearing a bra under it, because the lines would definitely show. Though the skirt was short, mid-thigh, it was full with the hem trimmed with white fleece. Julie sported a Santa hat, carefully placed to tip over the right side of her head. Knee-high patent leather boots with ridiculously high heels completed the outfit. A bright red winter coat was slung over one arm while the other clutched a small red beaded purse.

As Julie stopped at the bottom of the stairs, a frigid December breeze caught the wide flounce of her dress and drew it up, revealing lily-white thighs and bright red bikini panties. Her cheeks flushed as her hands pushed her skirt down. "I guess I should have put my coat on," she said softly.

Max was mesmerized. For the first time in his life, he was speechless. She looked so damn beautiful...so damn...well, he couldn't come up with anything more than beautiful.

Suddenly he heard a soft voice in his head. Tell her she looks lovely.

"You look lovely," he blurted out.

Tell her she looks cold. Offer to help her with her coat.

Max gazed at her. "It's cold," he said. "Why aren't you wearing your coat?"

"I thought it would take away from the dress," she replied.

Max moved forward, took the coat from her arm and wrapped it around her shoulders. "But it won't do to have you freeze to death."

"Thank you," she said softly as she pulled the lapels of the coat under her chin.

The voice in his head continued. Escort her into the limo.

Max grabbed her elbow and pulled her toward the limo.

"Get in."

Julie's light blue eyes darkened as she twisted out of his hold. "Excuse me?"

Dumb ass. Ask her nicely.

"Please," Max said softly as he smiled. "Won't you join me in the limo?"

It wasn't until Julie looked at his chauffeur that Max realized he was standing nearby. Geoffrey offered a reassuring smile as he pushed past Max and opened the limo door.

Julie hesitated as she glanced at the chauffeur. "He really can be a dumb ass, can't he?"

Max's throat tightened as Geoffrey grinned widely. "He certainly has his moments, Miss Thornton."

"Glad I'm not the only one who thinks so," she replied. She shot Max a withering glare before she crawled into the backseat of the limo.

Max sniffed indignantly as he followed Julie into the backseat. "Thanks for your help," he said.

Geoffrey nodded politely. "No problem," he said. As the door swung shut, Max was certain he'd heard the older man add, "Dumb ass."

* * * *

Julie wasn't sure getting into the limo with Max was the best decision she'd ever made. The chauffeur's reassuring smile eased her angst only for a moment. Once she crawled into the limo, she realized she was completely alone with Max. His musky scent filled her senses the second he got in beside her.

Julie clutched her purse on her lap and looked out the tinted window on her side as the limo moved into traffic. She could feel Max's eyes on her.

Why in hell had she decided to wear the Santa's helper outfit? She'd purchased it a few years ago for a Halloween party in Pencil, her hometown. Rob took one look at her in it and demanded she change her clothes. After all, he had to maintain his reputation in the town.

So what had possessed Julie to wear the dress tonight?

"You look beautiful," Max said softly. "That dress makes me wish it could be Christmas every day of the year."

Julie felt her body relax just a bit as she turned to look at him. "Really?"

Max nodded as he opened the bar. "Wine?"

When Julie nodded, she watched as he poured white wine into a crystal stemmed glass and handed it to her. "Thanks for the compliment," she said as she accepted the glass.

"You have no idea just how much of a compliment it is," he said as he put the bottle of wine away and filled a tumbler with ice. "I hate Christmas," he said as he opened a bottle of scotch and splashed it into the glass. "In fact, I don't remember a time when I enjoyed it."

Julie's eyes widened as she watched Max take a long swallow from his glass. "You can't be serious," she said. "Christmas is the most magical time of the year, especially for children."

"Not for me," he said solemnly. "Even though my father left when I was young, he kept a firm hand in my life. He didn't want his children to believe in anything other than money. Santa didn't bring gifts, his money did."

"That stinks," Julie replied. "Every kid has the right to believe in Santa Claus. What about your mother?"

Max's face clouded. He held his glass to his lips but didn't take a drink. It was almost as though he was frozen for a moment. Julie cocked her head to one side as she gazed at his profile. Handsome didn't begin to describe Maxwell Diamond. The words magnificent and stunning came to mind.

His tall muscular body loomed over Julie's five foot four inch height. Dark brown hair was swept back from his classically chiseled face. High cheekbones, a long, angular nose and firm jaw made Maxwell Diamond the most handsome of the Diamond brothers...and the most sought after.

Sure, his money helped to attract women from around the globe...but there was more to him than the Diamond fortune. The tabloids labeled him the Imperfect Diamond. He looked good on the surface but upon further inspection, the imperfections appeared. And Max seemed to revel in his so-called imperfections. He hid nothing from the tabloids and they, in turn, loved to shred him to bits.

Why? Julie couldn't help but wonder. And, considering how he seemed to freeze at the mention of his mother, there was definitely a connection.

She gave herself a mental shake. Now wasn't the time to press. Besides, she couldn't let the mystery that was Maxwell Diamond cloud her judgment. Or, for that matter, take away from the reason she was with him tonight. "Is now a good time to review the mail room issues?" She set her glass aside and opened her purse. "Obviously, I didn't bring the folder but I made a few notes on paper—"

"No," Max said as his hand shot out and closed her purse on her fingers. His once frozen expression thawed quicker than she could have imagined possible. "We can discuss the issues in the office on Monday." His warm hand gently massaged hers. "Tonight, I want to get to know you better."

Julie's body cooled in spite of the heat radiating from his touch on her hand. "You avoided me all week," she said. "Now that I have your attention, I want to discuss the problems in the mail room."

Max set his drink down and moved across the seat. He pressed his side against her as his hand lifted hers. "I already told you all your demands will be met," he said lazily before he pressed his lips to the back of her hand. "But go ahead anyway."

Julie tried to ignore his lips as she took a deep breath. "Okay," she said, gasping when he turned her hand over and ran his tongue over the inside of her wrist. "Well, I guess the first thing we need to discuss is the poor lighting—"

"At this moment, a team of electricians is rewiring the mail room with strict orders to have it completed before Monday morning. They are installing a new track lighting system which will simulate daylight."

"Oh," Julie replied. Max's lips left her wrist and began a slow, sensuous climb up her arm. His tongue slowly darted over the inside of her elbow. "Uhm, that's great," she said, trying to stay focused on the issues at hand. "Then there's the restroom. The old toilets don't stop running and there's never enough—"

Max cut her off again. "A plumber installed new toilets this morning and I ordered a large supply of paper towels."

Before Julie could take a breath, Max added, "And the restrooms will have the same lighting as the mail room."

"Wow," she said. "You certainly move fast."

Max chuckled against her elbow. "So they tell me." When he rested a hand on her knee, she knew they were talking about different things entirely.

"What about our workload? We can't keep up with the amount of mail coming in."

"Human Resources has an order to hire two additional staff for the mail room." That said, his hand slid up her knee and gently massaged the inside of her thigh. "Can we concentrate on something else now?"

Oh Lord, she wanted to. His lips had found their way to her throat and the touch of his hand on her inner thigh was driving her mad with need. But she had to cover all the bases. "There's still one more thing," she said, barely able to keep herself in check.

"Hmm, yes, wages," Max replied as his nose nuzzled her ear.

"We make barely over minimum wage."

"How does a four dollar an hour raise sound to you?"

Shocked, Julie pulled away in the hopes of looking into his eyes. When Max rested his rich brown eyes on her, she narrowed hers. "Are you serious?"

Max grinned. "Yes, I'm serious."

Julie wasn't convinced. "We're going to make four dollars an hour more? Just like that?"

Max nodded. "Retroactive to June 1st. I tried to go back to January but my father balked. Maybe Zack will approve it when he gets back."

Julie was stunned. She blinked, trying to process everything Max had just told her. Her mind reeled. "I can't believe it," she said excitedly. "I mean, I hoped but I never dreamed you'd be able to come through for us."

"I'm glad you're pleased," Max said as he leaned toward her again. "Now shut the hell up so I can kiss you."

As Max's mouth closed over hers, Julie's heart ached. He had no interest in the plight of the mail room workers at all. He wanted just one thing from her and was willing to go to great lengths to get it.

Max pulled his mouth off her lips. His rich brown eyes examined her closely. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Julie averted her gaze. "Nothing." She couldn't tell him. After all, he'd moved mountains to help her coworkers.

"Then why did it feel like I was kissing a brick?"

Julie sighed. Her hands wrung together on her lap. "It's just that..." She couldn't find the words.

Max reached up and pulled the Santa hat off her head and set it aside. Julie closed her eyes as he ran his fingers through her hair and then, gently curved his hand on the side of her neck. "Tell me," he said softly. "I want to know."

Julie took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "All right," she said as she lifted her eyes to his. "Did you meet all the mail room workers' demands because you want to get me into bed again?"

Max chuckled as his fingers trailed to her shoulder. "Again? As I recall, we didn't go to bed the first time."

"You know what I mean," Julie said impatiently.

"Sure I know what you mean," Max replied. "But we didn't go to bed."

"Okay," Julie said. "We didn't go to bed. We had sex. How's that?"

Max shrugged. "Guess you could call it that."

Julie frowned. "Well, what the hell would you call it?"

"Simple." Max grinned as his fingers pushed the strap of her dress aside and touched his lips to her shoulder. "You fucked me."

Julie gasped and pushed him away. "I f—" She couldn't say the word. "I did not!"

Max's head fell back as he laughed heartily. He moved a few inches away from her and rested against the seat. "You can't even say it."

"I don't want to say it!" Julie said angrily. "And besides, you were the one..." her voice trailed off again.

Max reached for his drink and took a long sip. "I was the one who...what?" he prodded, knowing how uncomfortable she was.

"You did it to me," she said. "Not the other way around."

"By it, you mean fuck, right? I fucked you."

"Yes, that's what I mean." Julie folded her arms over her chest and stared out the window.

Max filled the glasses again and held one out to Julie. When she didn't take it, he took her hand and wrapped her fingers around the glass. "Take a drink," he said. "It'll calm your nerves." When she didn't reply, he continued. "All right, let's just agree that we fucked each other."

Julie shivered. "Ugh, I hate that word. It's so vulgar."

"There's nothing vulgar about the word. It's how some people use it that can make it vulgar. I happen to think it's a very sexy word."

Julie snorted. "You would."

Max sighed. "I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have started the argument. Please don't be angry at me anymore."

Julie took a sip from her glass. "It's okay," she said finally. She turned to look at him. "You never answered my question." And right about now, Julie wasn't so sure she wanted an answer.

"No."

"No, what?"

"No, I didn't meet the demands in an effort to f—" he hesitated and then went on, "have sex with you again."

"Really?" Could she believe him?

"Look," he said, "for years I've been loafing around Diamond Industries as little as possible. When my father made me VP, he fully expected I'd simply be a figurehead, not actually do anything or make any decisions. After all, I'm the no-good, layabout who would never amount to anything."

Julie watched Max's brown eyes fill with intensity. Resentment peppered his words as he continued. "Maybe it's time I contributed something to this business. Maybe it's time to make my mark." He tipped his glass to his mouth and drained it. When he placed the glass down, he looked at Julie. "Maybe it's time I show the old bastard that I'm every bit as capable as my brother."

Julie's heart hammered in her chest, her body ached with the need for his touch.

"Did that answer your question?" Max asked as he reached forward to refill his glass.

Julie leapt forward and grabbed his hand. "Yes," she said breathlessly. "Kiss me."

Just as Max pulled her into his arms, the phone buzzed. "Damn," Max said as he reached to answer. "We're at the restaurant."

"I'm not hungry."

Max hesitated with his hand on the phone. "My place?"

Julie nodded, relief coursing through her veins.

Chapter 6

The drive to Max's condo seemed endless. The moment they stepped inside, he took Julie into his arms and covered her lips with his. He wasn't sure when he'd ever wanted a woman more than he wanted Julie at that moment. And judging by the way she kissed him back, she was feeling the same.

Max's mouth didn't lift from hers as he walked her backwards into the condo.

Julie tore her mouth from his. "Shouldn't we at least turn some lights on?" she asked breathlessly.

"Naw," Max said as her legs hit the edge of the leather sofa and he pushed her down. She squealed and giggled as he followed her down. "I'd rather feel my way," he said as he went to his knees in front of her.

Julie's giggles turned to a soft moan as his hands ran from her legs, up her torso and settled on her breasts. Her nipples pebbled beneath the velvet dress, making Max desperate to touch her hot flesh. As one hand continued to kneed, the other went to the back of her dress to find the zipper. The tiny tab slipped from his anxious fingers twice before he hooked his hand inside the back of her dress and began to pull.

"No, wait. Don't tear it." She pushed on his chest until he sat back on his knees. She stood up and reached behind her back. The lights from the street below cast a soft glow over Julie as the dress slid over her shoulders to the floor at her feet. Max licked his lips in anticipation as he gazed up at her

tiny waist. She wore a bright red lacy bra and matching bikini panties. With another flick of her fingers, the bra fell away, revealing her firm ripe breasts. When she would have stepped out of her panties, he brushed her hands away and curled his fingers into the waistband and slowly moved them down.

"Beautiful," he whispered as he leaned forward and kissed one thigh and then the other. "I thought I was dreaming last time but now I know everything is real."

Max rose quickly and discarded his clothes in a fury. He needed to have her again; he needed to own her body. The anticipation of driving his cock deep into her moist, tight depths made his body quake with a need he'd never known before.

Julie's soft hands held his waist as she sank back to the sofa, drawing him over her. "Kiss me," she said softly. "I want to feel your mouth on mine."

Max braced his knees on either side of her and lowered his mouth to hers. Her fingers slowly moved up and then slowly slid lower. He winced when they curled around his hungry cock. At first she simply ran her fingers over the sensitive skin but then, as his kiss deepened, her touch tightened and slowly pumped. He leaned into her touch, enjoying every stroke. When her other hand suddenly cupped his balls and gently massaged, Max thought he might explode right then and there.

He pulled her hands off him. "Easy, girl," he said through clenched teeth. "I don't want to disappoint you."

Julie smiled. "You won't."

"I will if you keep that up."

Max pushed her back onto the sofa and ran his hands over her naked body. When his mouth covered one nipple as his fingers found her core, she moaned. His fingers combed over her before he parted the lips of her vagina. He was delighted to find she was slick and more than ready for him. Julie raised one leg and hooked her knee over the back of the sofa while the other fell to the floor in an effort to give Max more access. As his fingers slid over her clit, she arched her back.

Max watched Julie's lovely face as he slowly slid his hand over her core and then, suddenly, mercilessly, pushed two deep fingers inside her. Jolting in surprise, her face contorted in sheer pleasure as her hips lifted to accept everything he had to offer.

Max leaned over her and placed a hard kiss on her lips.
"You like that?"

"Yes, yes!"

"How about this?" His thumb pressed against her slick clit, massaging as his fingers pulled out and then pushed in over and over again.

Julie opened her mouth but could not speak as her head thrashed back and forth. Max loved watching her like this. So out of control, so near climax. She never looked more beautiful. He could go on for ages, taking her to the brink and pushing her beyond.

But his own needs were too great to play the game for any longer. He pulled his fingers out and quickly crawled on top of her. He braced his hands on the arm of the sofa and stared down at her. "Do you want me to fuck you?"

Julie's legs wrapped around his waist as her fingernails dug into his shoulders. "Yes."

"Say it," he said through clenched teeth. "Say you want me to fuck you."

Julie moaned. "You're not playing fair."

Max chuckled softly. "Repeat after me. Fuck me."

Julie shook her head wildly. Suddenly her fingers wrapped around his cock and pumped wildly.

Max groaned. "Now who's not playing fair?" He pulled her hand away and rammed his cock into her depths.

When her body tightened around his thick cock, Max was almost afraid to move for fear he'd come right then and there. But Julie was relentless, arching her hips and withdrawing. Max matched her rhythm, meeting her stroke for stroke, pounding his hips against her pelvis until they were both out of breath. When he came, his orgasm hit him like a ton of bricks. He felt as though his body was exploding into a million pieces and every bit of life force within him had drained into Julie's magnificent body. He collapsed over her, his body riddled with tiny convulsions as he struggled to catch his breath.

It wasn't until he caught his breath that he realized he had his full body weight on top of her. When he braced his weight on his hands to ease off her, her arms wrapped around his waist and pulled him back.

"I'm too heavy," he said.

"I love the feel of you on top of me."

Max smiled and kissed her deeply before resting his chin on her shoulder.

"Okay," she said, pushing at his chest, "maybe you are too heavy."

Max chuckled and pushed off her, letting himself fall onto the floor beside the sofa.

The thump made Julie cry out. "Are you okay?"

Max placed his hands under his head as he gazed up at her. "Tell me the truth," he said. "You're really an alien sent to earth to sexually devour men, aren't you?"

Damn, he loved her sweet, lyrical laugh.

"That's right," she said as she got up and stepped over him. She grabbed his shirt and pulled it on. "And now that I've sucked you dry, I must continue my quest to find more men."

"You won't find any here," Max replied. And, until he'd had his fill of her, he'd make damn sure she didn't find any at all.

"All right then," Julie replied as she rolled up the cuffs on his shirt. "I'll settle for something to drink instead."

Max got off the floor and pulled his pants on before he walked to the minibar. He flicked on the light over the bar and opened the small fridge. "What would you like? Beer, wine?"

"Just water, thanks."

Max grinned when Julie looked around his condo in awe. Yeah, money seemed to have that effect on the women he met. Still, he had to admit Julie was different from the other women he brought home. Even though she blinked and gazed around at the lavish furnishings, her eyes seemed to show disappointment rather than interest.

"Something wrong?" he asked as he handed her a bottled water.

Julie wandered to the fireplace and cocked her head to one side. "No," she said, "not really. It's just that..." her voice trailed off.

"What?" he pressed as he slowly approached her. He wanted to know though he wasn't sure why. He'd brought her to his condo for one reason and one reason only. What she thought shouldn't matter to him.

Julie swung around, her brilliant blue eyes gazing at him with concern. "It's almost Christmas," she said. "Yet there isn't a single decoration. No tree, no lights or garland." Then she looked back at the marble mantel framing the elaborate gas fireplace. "Not even a single Christmas card on display."

Max snorted and shoved his hands in his pockets. That was why she looked so concerned? He poured some scotch into a glass and took a small sip. His eyes trained on the liquid as he responded, "I don't do Christmas."

Julie laughed. "Oh come on," she said incredulously, "who doesn't celebrate Christmas?"

"A lot of people don't," Max countered.

Julie splayed her arms out wide. "Okay," she said. "If you want to get nitpicky, many cultures don't. But our culture does. So you'll have to come up with a better excuse than that."

Max walked to the sofa and sat down. "I don't need an excuse." He wasn't about to describe how miserable the holidays were when he was a kid.

Julie sighed. "I'm sorry," she said, her cheeks flaming. "It's none of my business."

Max instantly felt sorry that he'd acted so cold. He patted the cushion beside him. "Tell me why you love Christmas so much."

When Julie sat beside him, he wrapped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her against him. Her body felt so warm and soft. Her hand rested on his lap as she laid her head against his chest. "We have several traditions for Christmas. My uncle Joe always shows up on Christmas Eve with a horse and sleigh to take us for a moonlit ride. We sing Christmas carols as the sleigh bells ring in our ears. Mom and Aunt Carol always stay behind to prepare for our return. We have hot chocolate and homemade cookies. She and my aunt bake for weeks to prepare for the holidays."

"Sounds like fun," Max commented.

"It is," Julie replied, a wistful smile on her full red lips. "Christmas morning is complete chaos. My three sisters come early with their families and all the kids are anxious to open their gifts. But Mom insists everyone sits down to have breakfast first. The rest of the day is spent enjoying each other's company and helping Mom prepare Christmas dinner."

"A regular Hallmark Christmas," Max said. "Bet there's even a kids' table set up for dinner."

Julie moved her head from his chest and gazed at him. "Why so sarcastic?"

Max hadn't realized he had been. "Sorry," he said. He hadn't meant to be. Still, it was hard for him to imagine having a Christmas like the one she described.

Julie leaned her head against his chest again. "What are you doing for Christmas?"

He sighed. "I'll be right here, enjoying the peace and quiet."

"That seems kinda sad."

Max snorted lightly. "So think of me when you're enjoying your family Christmas."

He frowned when Julie let out a long sigh. "What?"

"I have to admit, I've thought seriously about not going to my parents' this year."

"Why?"

"Well, there's this guy."

Max froze. Already he had to fight off men? "What guy?"

"Rob," she supplied. "We've had an on-again, off-again relationship for years. I always hoped he'd propose one day but when he didn't two Christmases ago, I decided to dump him completely and move to Toronto."

"So what's the problem?"

"He's decided he wants to marry me now. He's pressuring me to make the announcement at Christmas dinner."

"So just say no."

Julie got up from the sofa and walked toward the massive bay window. "It's not that simple. My parents love him and they've never liked that I moved to Toronto. They want me to move back to Pencil and marry him. I want to spend Christmas with my family this year but the moment I walk in the door, the pressure to give in will be on."

"So what if you brought your new boyfriend to celebrate the holidays with your family?"

Had he just said that? Had he lost his mind?

Julie laughed. Clearly she thought he had. "Are you serious?"

No, say no! "Sure," he said though hardly able to believe it himself. "You did say you wanted a Diamond for Christmas."

Julie gazed at him with uncertainty. "I don't know about this."

"I have just one stipulation," he said. "You have to attend my father's wedding with me on Boxing Day."

Chapter 7

"I'm just saying a little warning would have been nice," Sandra Thornton said as she broke eggs into a large bowl.

"It was a last-minute decision," Julie told her mother truthfully. It had taken her days to decide whether to accept Max's proposal to attend her family Christmas in exchange for going to his father's wedding with him. "I didn't think you'd mind my bringing someone home for the holidays."

"Did you see the look on the boy's face when you sent him to the basement?" Jack Thornton said as he sat at the kitchen table.

"Well, he could have slept in the attic with Cousin Harold."

Julie sighed. She'd come to the kitchen dressed in a housecoat in the hopes of finding a cup of coffee and then hightailing it back to the room she shared with two of her cousins. It seemed that was not going to happen. "No one wants to share a bed with Cousin Harold. Isn't that why he gets an entire bedroom to himself every Christmas while the rest of us have to bunk three or four to a bed?"

"He's an old man, Julie," her mother said. "Let's see how well you can keep your bodily functions in check when you're old."

"Unless you've actually survived a night with Cousin Harold, you have no right to say word one," her father said.

"Shut up, Jack," Sandra said. "If I want your opinion, I'll ask for it. Besides, that has nothing to do with what Julie dragged home last night."

Julie slapped the kitchen table in anger. "Mom! Max is a nice guy. He sure as hell didn't deserve to be sent to the basement last night."

"You overstepped, Sandy," her father added.

Her mother's face pinched as she glared at her husband. "Did you expect me to greet this man with open arms? I read the papers. I know what Maxwell Diamond is capable of. Is it so wrong to want something better for my daughter?"

Jack shook his head. "Your idea of better is having Julie move back to Pencil so she can be under your thumb."

"That's a lie. I only want what's best for Julie."

"I'm sick of hearing your version of what's best for everyone in this family."

"How dare you talk to me like that!"

"It's time someone put you in your place."

Julie sat at the table sipping her cup of coffee as she listened to the exchange between her parents. If ever there was a mismatched pair, Sandra and Jack Thornton were it. They could never agree on anything. For all the similar arguments she'd witnessed over the years, she knew of no two people who loved each other more than her parents did.

"And how nice you decided to back Julie up on this, Jack," her mother said sourly. "What about the fact Rob is going to join us for dinner and expects to ask Julie to marry him?"

"Bet Max will have something to say about that," Jack countered.

Her mother's eyes almost popped out of her head. "Who the hell cares what Max has to say..."

Bing bong.

Both her mother and father dropped their argument.

"That'll be your sisters and their families," Sandra said, forcing a bright smile on her face. "It's Christmas Day."

That pretty much said it all. There was to be no ill will, no hard feelings and no sad faces on Christmas Day. Jack raced after Sandra to the door, leaving Julie alone in the kitchen.

Seizing the moment, Julie jumped up from the table and filled a mug with coffee before she headed to the door at the back of the kitchen. She carefully closed the door behind her as she felt her way down the steep steps. With no light to guide her, she only hoped she'd find Max in one piece.

"Max?" she called as she finally felt her way down the last step in the basement. When she heard something scuttle across the floor, she bit back an oath. "Max!"

"Over here."

Julie followed his voice deeper into the dark basement. She stopped when she heard more scuttling.

"Don't let the rats stop you," Max said. "After spending the night down here, we're on good terms."

"Mom and Dad's house has rats?" Julie asked, trying to keep her voice from squealing.

"Either that or really big mice," Max replied. "You sound closer, keep walking toward my voice."

When she finally felt his arms circle her waist, Julie sighed in relief and stepped back. "I brought coffee," she said as she pressed the hot mug of coffee into his hand. "I'm so sorry, Max. I had no idea my parents would make you sleep down here."

"It's not so bad," he replied. "There's a finished room at the bottom of the stairs."

Julie stiffened in anger. "Then why..."

"Because I was just about to go upstairs when I overheard you and your parents arguing. Where we're standing right now is immediately below the kitchen."

"So you know what my parents think of you," Julie said, her heart racing.

"Don't give a sweet shit what they think. But I'm looking forward to seeing the look on ol' Rob's face when he comes to propose to you."

"I'm having second thoughts. I don't want to hurt Rob."

"Too little, too late," Max said as he took her hand. "Let me show you the room I slept in."

Sounds from the family upstairs filtered through the ceiling above them. One of her sisters played the piano while everyone sang Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.

Max growled, "I hate that song." His grip on Julie's hand tightened and he led her into the bedroom.

Julie looked around the sunlit room in awe. The basement had always had a dirt floor and was a scary place when she was a kid. She had no idea her parents had started to fix it up. The tiny room had one south-facing window that let tons of light in. The carpeted floor was soft and the walls were painted a light peach. The furniture was all hand-me-downs from the past: Julie's old dresser; the double bed her parents used before they bought a queen-sized; nightstands on either side of the bed that Julie remembered being in use in the

living room when she was a kid. But complete with a hand-hooked rug on the floor, it was comfortable and welcoming.

"I was waiting all night for you to find your way down here," Max said as he backed her against the bed.

"I was in the middle of two cousins in a double bed," she said. "It's amazing that I managed to climb out without waking them this morning."

When Max's hands went to untie her housecoat, her hands covered his. "It's Christmas morning," she said urgently. "Everyone expects us upstairs."

"They can wait," Max growled. "I can't."

Julie let her hands fall to her sides and Max quickly removed her housecoat and nightgown. He pushed her back until her knees caught the edge of the bed and she fell down on it, her legs splayed open.

Max took full advantage, falling to his knees between her legs and spreading them wider apart. His eyes darkened to molten lava when he looked at her core. He bent down, burying his face between her legs.

Julie gripped his head and dug her fingers into his hair as his tongue lapped her clit. She moaned and gave herself to him completely. Each stroke of his tongue drove her closer to oblivion. Her family was a far-off thought as she lifted her legs onto the edge of the bed to allow Max closer contact with her pussy.

Deep in her mind, Julie knew what they were doing was wrong on so many levels. Her mother had sent him to the basement last night to keep him a good distance away from her. Tonight, at supper, Rob intended to propose to her. And,

to top things off, she could hear Jingle Bells being sung by her family above them.

Julie knew she should care. Any decent daughter would care, wouldn't they? But she didn't. Every bit of her being was focused on Max's mouth and what he was doing to her pussy. Every fiber of her being wanted to feel his cock ram into her and drive her into the sweet realm of climax.

When Max shoved his fingers deep inside her, she knew nothing mattered more than this moment. When she could take no more, she pushed him away. She made an attempt to get him to climb onto the bed. Instead, he whirled her around, laying her on her stomach with her feet on the floor. His hands slid over her back and then slowly gripped her waist. She felt the tip of his cock press against her as his fingers tightened and pulled her back against his hard thrust.

Julie buried her face in the mattress as his firm, ripe cock filled her. The angle was different from what she'd known before. It hurt...and felt glorious at the same time. Her teeth gnashed as she bit back a scream of sheer ecstasy. As usual, Max was relentless as he pounded his cock into her moist depths. She'd come to know him as an all-or-nothing kind of guy. And when it came to her, nothing was not an option. He wanted all of her and gave her no choice in the matter.

When she felt him lean closer over her, she realized he had more to offer. When she felt his fingers suddenly touch her clit and stroke her, she knew she couldn't take much more. Her body convulsed. In an effort to escape the sweet torture, she wiggled her bottom and bucked against him. Max chuckled softly but didn't budge as his fingers continued to

rake over her clit. When she could take no more, she buried her face in the blankets and moaned as the orgasm took over her body. It was then that Max allowed himself to unleash the torrent he'd been holding back for some time. Waves of pleasure coursed through her body as his molten-hot semen shot into her depths.

"Max, have you seen Julie?"

They both stifled laughter as her mother's high-pitched voice called down to the basement.

Max struggled to catch his breath as he held Julie's naked body tight against him. "Haven't seen her."

"Well, get up here. Breakfast is almost ready."

"Sure thing, Mrs. Thornton."

"Great," Julie said, her heart now calm but anxiety quickly setting in. "Just how am I going to get by them in my bathrobe?"

"Easy, babe. You worry too much."

His calm and easy manner made it clear he'd been in tight situations like this before and always escaped unscathed. Poor guy. He didn't know her family.

"I'll go up the back stairs into the kitchen when everyone is gathered in there. You go up the stairs to the living room and run up to get dressed."

Well, it sounded easy and foolproof. Julie didn't have an opportunity to worry out loud. Max quickly dressed and walked up the back stairs. Julie cinched the tie at her waist and slowly ascended the stairs to the living room. She held her breath when several people greeted Max.

"Hey, did you see what a beautiful morning it is?" he asked loudly...too loudly. "This south-facing kitchen window sure has a nice view, doesn't it?"

Julie winced. So much for being versed in creating a diversion. Her mother would see through that in a second.

"It's snowing heavily," her father said. "What's to see?"

"Oh," Max said and after a brief hesitation he continued. "Take a look at those huge flakes. Talk about a picture-perfect Christmas morning."

"Where's Julie?" Sandra asked. After a chorus of 'don't knows', Julie knew if she didn't make her move now, she'd be stuck in the basement all day. She carefully twisted the doorknob and opened the door just enough to squeeze through.

"I'm sure she's in her room," Max said.

"Someone get her. Breakfast is ready," her mother said.

Grateful the stairs were just a few feet away, Julie raced up and ran into the bathroom. She slammed the door closed.

"Julie!" her father called as he walked up the stairs.

"Everyone's waiting for you."

Julie pulled the bathroom door open a crack and peered at her father. "Just have to get dressed, Dad. I'll be right down."

Jack smiled, the twinkle in his eyes telling all. "Hurry up, girl. Max is treading water trying to cover for you."

Chapter 8

"Hold still!" Julie said through clenched teeth as she applied powder over Max's left eye.

Max winced and gritted his teeth. "Do you have to press the brush so fucking hard?"

"I'm not pressing hard," she said. "I'm dabbing gently." She leaned back, gazing at her handiwork and cursed under her breath.

"What?"

"The bruise is covered," she said, "but there's no way to conceal the swelling."

Max got off the toilet seat and looked in the mirror. Fuck. He looked like he'd been several rounds with Rocky Balboa.

Julie shook her head in disdain. "Why did you have to bait Rob? The day with my family went so well until dinner."

"The guy's an asshole," Max countered. Sure, the day had gone well. In fact, it was the first Christmas he'd ever really enjoyed. But when Rob walked in and started spouting off about what he'd read in the tabloids about Max...well, the guy simply had it coming. Who knew the good doctor would pop him one when Max made a comment about his inability to satisfy Julie?

"Rob had every right to be angry," Julie countered.

"Right," Max said. "So Rob satisfied you in bed."

Julie dropped the brush and powder on the counter and flushed. "No, he never did. There was a time I thought I'd have to settle."

"So why was my comment wrong?"

"Well, you said it in front of thirty guests for starters."

Max chuckled. "Did you see that jelly salad splatter when he came across the table at me?"

Julie sighed as she leaned against the bathroom door.

"Yeah. It splattered all over everyone."

Max saw the dejected look on Julie's face and guilt welled inside him. He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her to him. "I'm sorry, Julie. I didn't intend to ruin the holiday with your family."

"You didn't," she said. "Most of the day was wonderful. It was just that last hour or so. And Rob really needed to know I've moved on."

Julie touched her lips to his and Max instantly felt fire build in his belly. When would he ever get enough of her? When would he ever tire of her?

When he would have deepened the kiss, Julie pushed him away. "Your father's wedding is in less than an hour. We have to go."

* * * *

With Geoffrey chauffeuring them to his father's wedding, it was all Max could do to keep his hands off Julie. She looked so damn delectable. The royal blue dress accentuated her eyes, making them even more vibrant than he'd ever seen them before. Her long lashes fluttered up and down as she smiled at him. Damn it. She'd have probably preferred to stay right there in his condo with him than go to the stupid wedding.

Max held Julie's hand tightly as they walked into the small chapel in downtown Toronto. He smiled widely when he spotted his oldest brother and his very pregnant wife.

"Alex, you old snake in the grass," Max said as his brother gripped his hand. "How are you?"

"Good." Alex frowned. "Nice shiner. What's the other guy look like?"

"Worse than me," he quipped. He embraced Alex's wife, Leigh-Ann, widening his arms in a grand gesture at her large belly. "You're glowing, Leigh. I'm so happy for you." He hoped his smile was convincing. He'd lied twice in a manner of seconds. Julie's ex walked away without so much as a bruise and it bugged the shit out of him that Alex had found love and happiness.

If Leigh-Ann noticed, she didn't let on. Her eyes fell to Julie. "Who do you have with you?"

"This is my friend, Julie Thornburg."

Julie stiffened, she glared at him. "Thornton."

Shit. He probably should have known that.

"Max, glad you made it." He turned to see Zack, his second oldest brother approach.

"Hey, bro," Max said as he shook his brother's hand. "Glad you and Brianna decided to come up for air. I hear congratulations are in order."

Zack focused on Max's black eye but, if he wondered what had happened, he didn't ask. "We need to talk about what's been going on in my absence."

Max happened to look at Julie. Her eyes darkened as they went from Zack to him. Did she suspect something? "It'll have

to wait until after the wedding," Max said nervously, hoping Zack would keep his mouth shut.

"Bri!" Julie stepped away from Max and embraced his newest sister-in-law.

"Julie," Bri said fondly as she hugged her. "It's so good to see you." Her gaze flitted over Max before turning back to Julie. "I see your wish came true."

"I'm not so sure," Julie replied unsteadily.

Zack gripped Max's arm tightly, tearing his attention away from Julie and Bri. Dark brown eyes collided with his. "There are a few things we need to discuss."

The minister cleared his throat and stated the wedding was about to begin. Max grinned at his brother as he pried his arm out of the firm grip. He took Julie's hand and led her to a front-row seat. If the shit was going to hit the fan, it might as well be later.

When they took their seats, Max leaned down and whispered in Julie's ear, "You didn't tell me that you know Bri."

Julie cocked her head to one side. "No, I didn't," she said stiffly. "I expect we both have a few secrets."

Max's gut tightened. When the organist suddenly began to play, everyone in the chapel stood to greet the bride and groom. Max breathed a sigh of relief. He'd been granted a little time to figure out how to handle the situation.

* * * *

"Alex and I met at his father's eightieth birthday party," Leigh-Ann said. "I won't say it was love at first sight but there was definitely a spark between us."

Julie smiled. "You look very happy together," she said as her fingers curled around her glass of white wine.

"We are happy. Alex can be a big oaf sometimes but he's a wonderful man and will be a fantastic father."

Julie couldn't help but gaze around the hall. Max had left the table with Zack some time ago. Where the heck is he? "You're very fortunate," she said.

"You started off a lot better than I did," Bri said. "I still can't believe my friendship with Zack was based on his belief that I was gay."

"You certainly showed him, sister," Leigh-Ann said as she raised her glass of club soda.

"I did, didn't I?" Bri replied as she clinked her glass of wine against her sister-in-law's.

"Speaking of Zack," Julie said. "He and Max have been gone for some time."

Bri shrugged. "Zack has never spent so much time away from work in his life. They're probably talking shop."

Julie had a sinking feeling they were doing just that. She'd had a sinking feeling about a lot of things today.

Leigh-Ann grinned. "I hear you. Alex doesn't like being away from the ranch too long."

"I'm going to the ladies' room," Julie said as she rose from the table.

"Want me to come with you?" Bri asked.

"No." Julie sped away without a backwards glance. She didn't want Bri to follow her. She made a beeline for the balcony door. Some unfathomable instinct told her that she'd find Max there.

She stopped at the door, knowing her senses were on the ball. Two tall figures stood by the railing. Julie quietly scooted closer, using a tall plant as a shield.

"What the fuck were you thinking?" Zack said angrily. "Why would you make all these promises when there was no chance in hell you'd be able to keep them?"

"The lighting system has already been taken care of," Max replied.

"I'm not saying it was a bad thing to do," Zack replied. "But you don't hire the first contractor who comes along. It could have been done just as good but a lot cheaper if you'd checked around first."

"Sorry, bro," Max said. "Never occurred to me to check around."

"No, I imagine it didn't. As usual, you were thinking with your cock."

"All right, I was," Max said. "But have you seen Julie? Who wouldn't want to fuck her? I've been having the ride of my life the last couple of weeks."

Julie's heart snapped in two. He'd been lying to her all along and, worse than that, he'd taken her coworkers along for the ride.

"There's a lot more to life than screwing beautiful women," Zack said.

Max snorted. "So says the pussy-whipped husband. Glad you and Alex are happy but monogamy isn't for everyone."

Zack shook his head. "I don't care what you think of monogamy," he said. "But I do care about Diamond Industries and I'm not willing to back up your bad financial decisions just because you want a mail room clerk in your bed."

Julie felt sick to her stomach. She stumbled out from behind the plant. She blindly walked up to the two men, her mind whirling, her body tense with anger.

Max turned, his eyes widened. "Julie—"

His words were cut off by the loud smack as her hand came into contact with his cheek. His head whipped to one side with the impact. "You bastard! Is that all I was to you?"

"Of course not. Just listen—"

"I have listened, Max. I've listened way too much. You told me all our demands had been met and I believed you. And..." she stopped for a moment, trying to catch her breath, "what about that long speech about wanting to prove your father was wrong about you? It was all an act, wasn't it?" She didn't need a reply, she knew the truth now.

"I didn't lie about everything—"

"Go to hell!" When she turned, he grabbed her arm. She twisted out of his grip.

"Wait! We need to talk."

But she didn't wait, she ran...and ran and ran, through the balcony door, through the hall, down the steps and three blocks before she finally couldn't run anymore. She leaned against a brick wall, covered her eyes and sobbed.

Chapter 9

Nina took her time reading the proposal. She smiled as she took a pen and signed on the designated line. "It's been a long time coming," she said. "I just wish Julie had stuck around to see it."

Max took the document and looked at the mail room supervisor. "Her loss," he said coolly.

"I suppose you know she moved back to Pencil two months ago," Nina said.

Yeah, he knew. Seemed she'd headed for the hills of Pencil right after she ran out on him. When he called her parents' house, they'd neither confirm nor deny she was there. But when Jack said he'd punch Max's lights out if he showed up in Pencil, it pretty much confirmed Julie's whereabouts.

"She's going to marry that doctor," Nina continued. "You know who I mean, he gave you a black eye."

Max nodded impatiently. "Yes, I know who you mean."

"Everyone in the mail room got an invitation. The wedding's next weekend."

"Good for her," Max said as he folded the document and stuffed it into the breast pocket of his suit coat. "I'm sure they'll be perfectly miserable together."

As he turned to walk out the door, Nina rounded her desk and grabbed his arm. "You aren't going to let her marry him, are you?" she asked incredulously.

"Of course I am," he said. "She's a big girl. She knows what she's doing." Max left quickly, not wanting to hear any more from Nina.

As he walked to the elevator, his head ached. It was bad enough she'd left Toronto without saying goodbye, but now she was going to marry that ass. He'd taken a black eye for Julie and didn't get so much as a thank you.

For the past two months, Max found himself missing Julie every second of every day. He sank himself into work, spending every waking moment at Diamond Industries, giving everything he had to the company. It was better than wallowing around his apartment missing that damn blond.

While Zack wasn't pleased with the promises Max had made to the mail room, his hard work and dedication to the betterment of not just the employees in the mail room but everyone working for the company, soon proved beneficial. Productivity was up almost sixty percent. Max had shown Zach and his father that happy employees were more productive and thereby established he was worthy of being VP.

Even though Julie walked away, Max knew her well enough. She'd be watching from the sidelines and cheering for her former coworkers.

The very least Max deserved was a thank you from the bitch.

* * * *

Julie sighed. "I hate it," she said as she gazed at the billowing ruffles that began just below her breasts and continued to the floor. "I look like a giant marshmallow."

Sandra sat on the settee and gazed at her daughter with a discerning eye. "I don't mind this one. It accentuates your hips."

Julie laughed out loud. "I can't see my hips under all this fluff."

Her mother chuckled. "I was trying to be supportive. This is the seventh dress you've tried on. Louise's Wedding Shop is the only one in town. If she doesn't have another dress you like, we'll have to go into the city."

Julie quickly stripped out of the dress and handed it to her mother. "I promise I'll go with the next dress you bring in...well, as long as it's not as ugly as this one."

"I'll see," Sandra said as she toted the dress with her out the fitting room door.

Julie sighed as she gazed at herself in the mirror. In only her lacy bra and high-cut silk panties, her eyes roved over her form. She frowned when she spotted a blue vein near her ankle and bent to examine it closer.

"That's my favorite pose. Wish I'd brought my camera."

Startled, Julie stumbled forward. Firm hands gripped her hips and saved her from tumbling to the floor. She whipped around, her heart racing, her mind whirling. "Max," she hissed. "How the hell did you get in here?"

"It wasn't hard. The fitting room has a back porch and the door wasn't locked," he said, grinning widely.

Julie cursed inwardly. That's what she got for looking for a wedding dress in a small town. The only shop in town was in an old house on a back street.

"What are you doing here?" she asked as her heart pounded in her throat.

"Figured we had some unfinished business," he said as he threw himself onto the settee.

"We have nothing to say to each other," she said. "My mother is coming back any minute so you have to get out of here."

"Lock the door," Max said.

"I will not!" she said angrily. "Get out or I'll call the cops."

Max pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and held it out to her. "Be my guest."

Julie glared at him but knew she wouldn't call the police. She hated that her body ached with need at the sight of him. He'd betrayed her. He'd lied to her to get her into his bed. The fact the sex was amazing didn't matter. She hated herself for wanting him again.

But she was weak. It had been two months since she'd been in his arms and everything inside her wanted his touch again.

"I can't do this, Max. It's over. I'm going to marry Rob."

"So I hear. And that's okay with me. But we have to settle things between us first."

"There's nothing to settle!" Julie cried. "Please go."

He could never know just how hard it was for her to move on even though she knew he wanted nothing more than sex. Max had become an addiction in the short time they were together. So much so that she'd come to hope they'd have a future.

"Lock the door," he said softly.

"I will not."

Max got off the settee. His fingers curled around the hem of the golf shirt he was wearing and pulled it off.

Julie swallowed hard. "What the hell are you doing?" she asked frantically.

He tossed his shirt aside then his fingers went to the fly of his jeans. He pulled them down and pushed both his jeans and his briefs down his legs. He left them pooled at his feet. "I wonder what your mother will think when she sees me naked?"

Julie's eyes fell to his massive cock. It lay dormant for only a moment but came to life under the caress of her gaze. She tore her gaze away, focusing on his face again. "Are you insane?"

Max smiled and shrugged. "Some experts say yes, others no. It's debatable really."

A soft tap on the door caught Julie's attention. She frantically threw herself against the door, preventing her mother from opening it.

"Honey?" her mother called through the door.

"Yes?" she replied nervously.

"I think I've got the perfect dress. Let me in."

"I need a few minutes alone," Julie said, hoping her mother wouldn't ask her to explain.

"Oh," Sandra said. And then she whispered, "Is it a female thing?"

"Yes!" Julie said, so damn glad her mother had come up with a good explanation on her own even though she wasn't sure what the woman meant. "Just give me a few minutes."

"Take your time, dear. Louise and I are going to have tea." Her mother's voice lowered again. "Sounds like her husband's up to his old tricks again, the poor thing."

Julie had no idea what old tricks Louise's husband was up to and, just now, she wasn't too concerned. The fact Max Diamond was standing naked in front of her was just about all she could handle at the moment.

Julie wasn't sure what she should do but she knew in her heart that she should not want Max. After she'd limped home, she quickly accepted Rob's proposal and resigned herself to the fact she was about to become the wife of the small-town doctor. It wasn't a bad thing. Rob was a good man, a trustworthy man. Steadfast and true, he'd make the perfect father for her children. The fact he was boring as all get out shouldn't matter. He was the man she'd learn to love and, her mother assured her, she'd one day look back and be glad she'd married him.

And then there was Max. The man had no scruples. He was all about having a good time...and at this moment, Julie was the good time he wanted.

It seemed she had few scruples too. Her hand reached for the door and locked it. Who could blame her for wanting Max one more time? It was just for old time's sake...one last tryst before she made a lifelong commitment to a man who made watching paint dry exciting.

Max's smile deepened as he walked toward her. Julie could not manage to push off the door she'd just locked. Her mind and body focused on Max, on how much she'd missed him and, most of all, how much she wanted him.

"I missed you," he said as his arms wrapped around her. "You have no idea just how much."

When his ripe cock slid against her belly, hot and throbbing, Julie knew how much he'd missed her firsthand. She knew she should push him away, deny him what he'd come for. But his touch made her lose all her resolve. Her nipples peaked beneath the confines of her bra; her core moistened in anticipation of his touch.

And his kiss. Oh, those incredible lips. Soft but insistent, gentle but persuasive, the moment his mouth closed over hers, she knew she'd willingly give him anything he wanted.

Max didn't waste any time. Once she was under his erotic spell, he lifted her legs and wrapped them around his waist. She moaned when his fingers pressed between them to pry the crotch of her panties aside.

She gasped when she felt the tip of his cock against her moist slit. She needed him like never before and yet, with her back pressed against the door and her legs wrapped around his waist, she couldn't seem to maneuver her hips.

His mouth moved from her lips to her throat as one of his hands pushed her bra off her breasts. His fingers circled and then gently pinched one nipple before he moved to the other.

Julie felt powerless as she tried to move against him. "Max," she cried, "I can't wait!"

His voice was muffled as he continued kissing her neck. "Can't wait for what?" he asked.

"Take me now," she said urgently.

Max's mouth lifted and pressed a kiss on her lips. "You want me to fuck you?"

"Yes."

"Take me!" she cried urgently.

Suddenly her feet hit the floor and Max backed away from her. She blinked as he retreated and watched as he sank down on the settee. She felt like she'd been doused in ice-cold water as he calmly smiled at her. "Say it," he said.

How had she let it come to this? He'd messed with her head for weeks and she'd thought she'd escaped him. But she hadn't, not really. Her body would always belong to him. Still, he wanted her to say a word she flat out hated. "No," she said.

Max shrugged. "Okay." He got up and retrieved his clothes. Turning his back to her, he started to step into his pants.

Julie could take no more. She said what he wanted to hear softly. "Fuck me."

Max turned to her. "Huh?"

Julie flew across the room at Max. He toppled on the settee on his back as she splayed her legs on either side of him. She didn't wait for him to settle before she impaled herself on his engorged cock. Her hands gripped his face as his girth filled her. She struggled to find her voice. "I said fuck me, damn you!"

"With pleasure," he said through clenched teeth. And he did just that. He held her hips as he rammed his cock into her again and again. His fingers dug into her buttocks as he held her tight against him.

With each thrust, Julie felt her body convulse with sheer pleasure. Each move took her closer to sweet climax. When

his hand delved between them and touched her swollen clit, her body let loose, shattering into a million pieces. She cried out when she felt his release, his molten-hot semen shooting into her. Her core contracted, milking his cock for every drop he had before she finally collapsed over him.

Max held her close as the tremors of their lovemaking slowly subsided. "You don't belong here," he whispered in her ear. "Come back to Toronto with me."

Julie's heart clenched. She loved him with every fiber of her being. If only he loved her too. He betrayed her. He'd lied to her. As much as she wanted to be with him, she knew her place was here in Pencil.

"I can't." Tears trickled down her cheeks as she held him close for the last time.

"Julie—"

She pressed her fingers over his mouth. She shook her head sadly. "I just can't." After today, she would never see him again. After today, she'd make a firm commitment to Rob.

Chapter 10

"Stop blaming yourself," Alex said as he clapped his hand on Max's shoulder. "The coroner said Dad's heart was a ticking time bomb."

Unable to say a word, Max nodded, acknowledging his oldest brother's support as the pallbearers carried the casket to the gravesite.

When the shiny oak casket was finally in its place, the minister's solemn voice echoed over the crowd gathered to bid farewell to Edward Diamond.

"Let us pray," the minister said as he raised his hands in a silent command that everyone should bow their heads. "Beloved Lord, we humbly ask you to accept our brother, Edward Diamond, into your Heavenly arms..."

Would his father find Heaven? If he did, would he be accepted or turned away? Max's mind whirled. The memory of his father's death still fresh in his mind.

Edward had burst into Max's office, angry that Zack had accepted each and every one of the changes Max wanted to implement in the mail room. Edward's face was bright red; he yelled at Max, insisted he would single-handedly topple Diamond Industries with foolish spending.

He'd had enough of his father's antics. Even Zack knew Max was making an effort to make his mark with the company. But, when Max hotly defended himself, his father suddenly clutched his chest and fell to the floor. Max called 911 and began CPR. His father rallied for just a moment before the paramedics arrived. His eyes opened wide and he

feebly beckoned Max to him. Max leaned over his father, knowing the old man was barely clinging to life. His voice was raspy, barely audible.

"You're nothing..." Unable to continue, Edward closed his eyes as what little life force he had left drained from his body.

When the minister finished his prayers, several people stepped forward to lay a rose on top of Edward's casket. A cold March wind chilled everyone as they turned to leave the graveyard. Yet Max stood in place.

"It's time to go," Zack said as he laid a hand on Max's shoulder. "There's a lunch in the church basement."

"Go," Max said. "I'll be there shortly. I just need a minute alone with Dad."

Zack said nothing as he turned to follow the crowd out of the cemetery to the church across the street.

Once Max was certain he was alone, he sat down on the chilly ground and curled his arms around his knees as he stared at his father's casket. "You were never much of a father to me," he said. "I want to hate you but I just can't. You're my father and no matter how rotten you were as a dad, I will always love you. I'm just sorry your dying words were so hateful."

"What did your father say?"

Max wasn't sure if he'd heard the soft voice or if he was imagining things. He twisted to see Julie standing just a few feet away. She looked even more beautiful than he remembered.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"When I heard Edward passed away, I wanted to make sure you were okay," she replied as she walked to his side and then sank down beside him. "You didn't answer my question. What did your father say to you before he died?"

Max tried to ignore how close Julie was. She was a married woman now and even though he'd dallied with married women in his past, he'd since turned over a new leaf. "He said I was nothing."

Julie took a deep breath in and let it out slowly. "That's what he told me too," she said.

Max frowned. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Tears trickled down Julie's cheeks as she looked at the casket. "A week ago, your father called me. It was the night before my wedding and he told me that I was about to make a huge mistake. He said I was nothing without you."

"So you think his last words to me..."

"Yes," Julie replied. "Your father died before he could tell you how he felt. If I'm nothing without you, then you're nothing without me."

Was it possible? Was his father really trying to tell him to find Julie and make a life with her?

Odds were his old man had no good intentions. But the fact Julie had come to him, was now sitting at his side as he struggled to say goodbye to his father, spoke volumes.

Max took Julie's hand and rose, drawing her up with him. As he led her away from the gravesite, his fingers tightened around her hand.

"So you didn't get married?"

"No," she replied.

Max stopped and drew her into his arms. "I'm sorry for what I did," he said. "I did want you in my bed and I made promises I knew I couldn't keep to get you there. I deceived you and you have every right to hate me."

"But I don't hate you," Julie said. "I know you don't want to hear this but I love you with every fiber of my being."

Max swallowed hard, unsure how to reply. "Julie," he said, his voice low. "I can't promise you anything. I'm not sure I have what it takes to truly love someone."

"I understand," she said as she rested her head on his chest. "All I ask is that you give me today and maybe tomorrow. If you tire of me, I'll accept it."

Max wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. As his lips settled on hers, he knew one thing for sure...he would never tire of her. Not today, not tomorrow...not ever. He may never be able to find the words to assure her but he hoped his touch, his body and, giving his soul to her, would eventually convince Julie that she would never live a day without him again.

"I have to get to the hall," he said. "I told my brothers I'd be there soon."

Sea blue eyes gazed up at him. "I saw Geoffrey with the limo. Do you want me to wait there for you?"

"No," Max said as he took her hand and led her to the church hall. "Our future begins today. We'll take it on together."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peggy Hunter lives in midwestern Ontario with her husband and son. An animal lover, you can bet you'll find lots of critters roaming the farm...and, much to her husband's chagrin, some can be found in the house too.

Peggy is thrilled to see the release of the third Diamonds Are Forever book. She especially loved writing Max's story and came to the end with just a bit of sorrow. Having fallen in love with the Diamond men and their stories, Peggy thinks there's a chance we may see them again one day. Let's hope so!

A Diamond For Christmas [Diamonds Are Forever Book 3]
by Peggy Hunter

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