

# *The Knight Before Chris*



*Peggy Hunter*

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*by Peggy Hunter*

**Whiskey Creek Press**

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WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT  
*THE KNIGHT BEFORE CHRIS*

\*\*\*\*\*Superior Recommended Read

"This was a pleasure to read. Chris and Winter argue and battle their attraction, make love and battle their attraction, and they argue. But the battling is fun to read. The storyline is interesting and moves along swiftly. The characters are adorable with well rounded personalities. The sexual situations are well written and exhilarating. I look forward to read more by this wonderful writer."

May @ MayReview.com

5 Angels

"In *The Knight Before Chris*, Winter and Chris show that there's more than one way to keep warm in a snowstorm. You'll never look at a rustic, cramped cabin the same way after you read this hotly erotic book. Peggy Hunter turns up the heat in a big way, nearly melting all of the icicles in the vicinity as her characters show how snow sports and fun in the great outdoors should really be done. How do you reconcile your attraction to someone you don't even like? Perhaps passion like this could be therapeutic! Take a read of Peggy Hunter's *The Night Before Chris* and find out for yourself! Five Angels!"

Michelle, Fallen Angels Reviews

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Dedication

For Ron. The devil made me do it!

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Chapter 1

"You'll have to speak up," Chris shouted into his cell phone. "The reception up here sucks. I can't hear you."

He frowned and closed his eyes in an effort to concentrate on the garbled words beneath the hiss of static. " ... *Winter ... there...* "

"Yes," Chris called back. "It definitely is winter up here. But there's lots of wood in the shed for the fireplace and the cookstove and I brought several cans of gas for the generator. I'm fine."

*"...no ... listen ... Winter ... on the way..."*

"Jimmy, I can hardly hear you. Don't worry about me, okay? I'm looking forward to being alone this Christmas. Give Susan a kiss for me and tell the kids they can't open the presents I got for them until Christmas morning. Happy holidays, pal."

Chris didn't wait for his best friend to respond; he hit the end button on his phone, switched it off and tossed it on the coffee table. What the hell was Jimmy talking about? Winter was more than on its way. Even if it wasn't the twenty-first of December, all he had to do was look out the window to see the heavy snow coming down.

Thank God he'd arrived at Jimmy's cabin when he did. Another hour or two and he'd have been driving his car up the hills in the blinding snowstorm. He shivered at the prospect, tossed another log on the fire in the hearth and pulled the bright red wool blanket tighter around his shoulders.



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Damn, the quiet was good. After the last few weeks, he needed a place to hunker down and lick his wounds. Jimmy and his wife tried to talk him out of spending Christmas alone. But shit, when his divorce was finalized last week after a two year battle, he didn't feel much like celebrating the holidays. Besides, the last fucking person he wanted to see was Jimmy's sister!

Chris leaned forward and picked up his mug from the coffee table. He blew the steam off and took a long sip of hot chocolate before he leaned back and put his feet up on the table. He moved his toes inside the heavy wool socks as the heat from the hearth warmed them.

Nope, he had no regrets. Spending the holidays holed up in his best friend's cabin was exactly what he needed. He needed to be alone.

\* \* \* \*

Winter Knight bowed her head against the howling wind and driving snow as she made her way to her brother's cabin. Her stylish, sporty car would only go so far on the steep, snowy roads. When the little shit box would go no further, she was forced to walk the rest of the way on foot, dragging just one of her bags of luggage along with her. God, she hoped the bag she'd chosen had the stash of coffee in it. She'd so need a jolt of caffeine when she finally got to Jimmy's cabin.

Winter grimaced and pulled the hood of her coat tighter around her face as the wind whipped snow over her. The faux fur trim around the hood felt like sandpaper against her

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freezing cheeks. She'd been trudging through knee-deep snow for what seemed like hours before she finally caught sight of Jimmy's cabin.

*Good! This is good!* Unless, of course, she was hallucinating. Her toes were frozen in the designer boots she wore. Every step she took was a new adventure in pain. God, she could only hope Gilles Gothier, the haut couture designer, would eventually end up in divorce court as a defendant. No woman should suffer the torture of wearing these boots during inclement weather. She'd ream his fucking ass out and be thanked by every woman who could afford his stylish but nonfunctional designs.

As Winter made her way through the blinding snow, she frowned when she saw the Jeep parked near the cabin and the soft light shining through the windows. It occurred to her that she wouldn't be alone in her brother's cabin as she had hoped. She considered it for only a moment. She was too damn cold and the cabin looked far too inviting to care.

Thank God the cabin door was open. Her fingers were too numb to reach into her pocket for the key. Snow billowed in a cloud around her as she turned to lug her suitcase indoors. She moaned when the brittle strap broke and the bag fell on its side in a snowdrift just outside the door.

*That did it!* Winter growled in anger. She tossed the broken strap aside and kicked the door closed. She howled when her frozen foot protested against the action. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!" she wailed as she hopped on one foot.

"That's exactly what I thought when I saw you come through the door."

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*Okay, Knight, you didn't hear that voice. Your guilty conscience is playing tricks on you. There's no way that guy could be here!*

Winter closed her eyes tight and took a deep breath. She made a feeble attempt to count to ten before she opened her eyes and peered over her shoulder. Her heart dropped to her toes. She hadn't been imagining that rich, sexy baritone. It really was Chris Donnelly!

*This isn't happening!* There was no way the man was in her brother's cabin right this second. Winter squeezed her eyes closed again and shook her head, hoping to dispel her whacked-out vision.

"Well now," the vision said as Winter squeezed her eyes shut tighter. "If it isn't *the Barracuda* herself."

God, she hated that name! Her eyes flew open and she glared at Chris. "Don't you ever call me that, you fucking asshole!"

She trembled with anger when he simply smiled. "I've learned the hard way that the shoe fits," he said smugly.

Since her heart had already dropped to her toes, there was little else her chest could do other than cave in with anger. "If the shoe fits, it's your own damn fault," she said. "The only thing I'm guilty of is making sure your ex-wife got what was coming to her."

"I take it you're aware she took off with her Latin lover, our former pool boy, to France for the holidays."

Winter winced. There was no mistaking the bitterness in his voice or the fact she had a role in the farce to screw him out of millions of dollars.

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"The judge made the final decision. There's no point to rehashing it." When he didn't respond, she went on, "I'm afraid you'll have to vacate the premises."

Chris' head tilted back as he laughed. "I don't think so," he said. "Jimmy gave me the use of the cabin for the next ten days. I have no intention of leaving."

"I'm Jimmy's sister," Winter said. "That gives me more right to be here than you. Get the fuck out!"

Chris' throaty chuckle grated on her nerves. "Your brother gave me the use of the cabin. You're the unwanted party. And hell, look at the snow outside. Gonna be a son of a bitch hiking back to the rock you crawled out from under."

Winter gritted her teeth. "I'm not going anywhere. The second the storm clears, I'll call Jimmy and have him tell you personally that you don't belong here."

Chris eyes narrowed slightly. "Does your brother bend to your will the same way every other man in your life does?"

"Excuse me?" Winter said, quite incensed. "What the hell do you know about the men in my life?"

Chris grinned. "Your reputation proceeds you," he said. "Barracuda in divorce court, barracuda in the bedroom. I've heard there's at least one man with your teeth marks on his ass after having tangled with you in the bedroom."

*Damn it, Jimmy!* How could he have told Chris about that? It was definitely not one of the shining moments in her life. Especially when the guy called the cops, showed his dented ass and insisted she be charged with assault.

She had to admit, in spite of her shattered heart, she regretted what she'd done. The cop who'd charged her said

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Jeff hadn't caused physical damage while she had. She begged to differ. Jeff's ass heeled, her shattered heart never would.

It had taken so much for her to trust Jeff and when she finally did, she'd loved him with every fiber of her being. When he betrayed her...

Winter shivered. "What happens in my bedroom is none of your affair," she shot back.

She didn't want to go there; she didn't want to replay that horrible night. The only good thing that came from Jeff's betrayal was that she'd become a damn good divorce lawyer. She may never love again, but at least she could help the women hurt as badly as she'd been.

"I agree," Chris replied. "But what you did to me in the courtroom is very much my affair."

Another twinge of guilt coursed through her. She had set out to help women who'd been hurt as badly as she'd been. And then there was Linda Donnelly...

"It's water under the bridge," she said. "Your divorce is finalized now. Move on."

"I expect you can move on," Chris retorted. "What with the fat check you deposited at my expense. It's not quite that easy for me. I'm fucking lucky to have two cents to rub together."

"What? I thought we'd cleaned you out," Winter said sarcastically. "I'm sorry to hear I left two cents unaccounted for."

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Rich green eyes impaled her, sank into her soul. Winter tried to ignore the thrill of excitement that coursed through her body and settled in her core.

There was no denying Chris Donnelly was a handsome man. Tall, he towered over her five foot eight frame. He was lean and muscular with chiseled good looks. Dark brown hair swept back from his face, which included a long, angular nose and a gentle cleft in his chin.

She wasn't sure, but he might just have dimples in his cheeks when he smiled. She had to admit, in the past two years, she'd only seen him in either negotiation meetings or the courtroom ... and the man sure as hell wasn't smiling then.

Chris' most striking feature was his eyes. Emerald green, framed by long dark lashes and thick eyebrows. One look from him could kill. But she could imagine those eyes gazing at a woman with desire. She imagined the same intense gaze he was giving her now, only his face wouldn't be furrowed in anger.

"You're a sarcastic little bitch, aren't you?" Chris said.

"I don't see any reason for name calling," Winter replied. "The fact is we're stuck with each other until the storm subsides. I recommend we make the best of it."

Chris' gaze ran over her from head to toe. "And just how do you see that working?"

Winter pulled the zipper of her coat down and shucked out of it. "Well, I expect we'll just have to keep our distance." She peered around the cozy cabin. A closed door caught her eye.

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"I'll take the bedroom and you can sleep out here on the couch," she said.

Chris rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Never mind the fact that I was here first and have already unpacked."

"This cabin belongs to my brother," she said as she walked toward the closed door. "That definitely outranks your dibs on the room."

Chris quickly blocked her path. She'd almost walked into his chest as he stood in front of the door. "I don't think so," he said softly. "If you want the bedroom, you're going to have to fight me for it."

*Damn!* She stood stark still and stared up at him. She didn't blink as she made an attempt to stare him down. She wasn't about to budge, or give in to him.

"Get out of my way, Donnelly," she said.

\* \* \* \*

Hell, she was a beautiful woman. Long, light brown hair framed her oval face. Rich blue eyes that gazed up at him with contempt. Her chest heaved slightly, accentuating small, firm breasts beneath the heavy white cable-knit sweater she wore. Her jeans were cinched tight around her tiny waist, accentuating the swell of her hips and long slender legs.

Chris felt a certain measure of sexual excitement course through him. He had to admit, in spite of Linda's efforts to ruin him, he often found himself fantasizing about her divorce lawyer. He'd had many sleepless nights imagining Winter Knight bent over the desk in the courtroom, the skirt of her stuffy business suit shoved up over her ass as he drove into

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her from behind. She was fiery and defiant, and most of all, sexier than any woman he'd ever encountered.

*But hell!* Winter had chosen to represent Linda, in spite of their family connection and that bugged the shit out of him. Before Linda hired her, he'd only met Winter in passing at Jimmy's house. Still, being his best friend's sister was a definite conflict of interest, something any reputable lawyer should have considered.

Chris had been careful about what he said to Jimmy. After all, Jimmy was very protective of her. He was eighteen when his parents were killed in a car accident and he quickly took over raising his fourteen year old sister. And he'd done a damn good job. Winter had grown into a very strong woman. The type who wasn't going to be pushed around by anyone, most certainly not a man.

Unfortunately, Chris had firsthand knowledge of just how good Winter was at defending scorned women.

So be it. Chris couldn't change the past but he sure as hell wasn't going to give in to Winter's demands now. In fact, he'd like an excuse to take her down a few notches, maybe an opportunity to show just how powerful he really was.

As she stood in front of him, unwilling to give in, he imagined wrapping his arms around her and pushing her to the floor. She'd fight him at first, but once he sank his cock inside her, she'd relent, willingly giving herself to him. He'd fuck her within an inch of her life.

His hand touched her cheek as he stared down at her. He smiled slowly when she flinched and took a step back. "We're not in a courtroom now, Winter," he said softly. "I suggest



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you don't push me unless you're willing to pay the consequences."

Winter's eyes narrowed. Her chin jutted up as she sniffed. "Fine," she said tightly. "I'll sleep on the couch."

"A wise decision," he said. He walked into the bedroom and retrieved a pillow and a few blankets from the closet. He tossed them on the floor at her feet. "Sleep well."

He chuckled when he heard a soft oath through the closed bedroom door. "Bastard."

Oh, she didn't know the half of it! If the weather forecast was right, they were going to be stuck with each for the next few days. He fully intended to make her life as miserable as she'd made his for the past two years.

## Chapter 2

Winter woke to the alluring smell of freshly brewed coffee. She pushed the layers of heavy blankets aside and sat up. The wind continued to howl outside the cabin but inside was toasty warm. She brushed her hair away from her face as she peered around her.

"Thought you were going to sleep all day," the familiar husky voice sounded. She opened her eyes wider and located Chris sitting in the armchair near the hearth. He looked absolutely gorgeous in his tight blue jeans and heavy white wool sweater. Clean-shaven, his damp hair was combed back from his face. His spicy scent combined with the smell of fresh coffee.

"What time is it?" she mumbled as she combed her hair with her fingers.

"Almost nine," he said and then chuckled. "Give it up. Your hair's a mess. You must be a restless sleeper."

"As a matter of fact, I'm not a restless sleeper," Winter replied.

"Really? I would've thought all the men you've screwed in the past few years would weigh heavy on your mind." He toasted her with his coffee mug. "My mistake for thinking you might have a conscience."

"Oh, piss off!" Winter shot up from the couch and walked to the kitchenette. It was too damn early in her day to fight with the likes of Chris Donnelly! She needed at least one cup of coffee first. She grabbed the enamel coffee pot on the

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counter and frowned. The pot was not only cold, it was empty.

"Oh, did you want coffee?" Chris' voice was laced with sarcasm. "I've been up for a couple hours so," he raised his mug, "this is the last cup."

*All right. That's fine.* She didn't need his coffee anyway. "I'll make a pot for myself after I've had a shower."

"You want to take a shower, too? Hell, that's too bad." He smiled wickedly. "There's no hot water."

Winter attempted to count to ten. She knew what he was doing. He wanted to get under her skin; he wanted her to push her buttons. She took a deep breath. "Looks like you took a shower," she said, indicating his still-damp hair.

Chris nodded. "Yeah, I started the generator a couple hours ago, just long enough to heat the water and take a quick shower."

Winter sighed. "Let me guess," she said. "It's too much trouble for you to start the generator for me."

"Well, yes," he replied. "We need to conserve fuel. We don't know how long we'll be stuck here."

If she had anything to say about it, they wouldn't be stuck here long!

*All right then. No shower.* She could wait for a day or so. But she needed coffee and she needed it now! She dug into the one bag she'd brought and located her favorite can of coffee. When she held it up, Chris spoke again.

"Aw," he said, "does that coffee need to be perked?" He didn't wait for her reply. "Shit, that's really too bad. See, there's no power, so there's no way to perk it."

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Winter tossed the can onto the floor in disgust. Fuck holding her temper, she needed coffee! "What the hell do you expect me to do?" she said vehemently. "I should warn you that you won't like me one bit without my morning coffee."

Chris' laugh grated her already frayed nerves. "I don't like you anyway. Why would I care whether you've had your precious coffee or not?"

*The entire situation was beyond belief!* She tried to settle her rattled nerves, each and every one anxious to kill the bastard with the ever-so-fucking-sexy grin on his face. Winter felt anger that started at her toes and slowly made its way up. The man had no idea just what he was getting into.

"All right," Chris said. He'd clearly seen just how frustrated she was. "Don't blow a fuse. There's a kettle of hot water by the fire and instant coffee."

Winter hated instant coffee but at this point, she wasn't about to complain. Chris got up and walked to the cupboards. He retrieved a jar of instant coffee and spooned it into a mug before he walked to the hearth, grabbed the pot and poured hot water into it. His eyes blazed as he handed the mug to her. "Here you go. Now shut the hell up."

Winter's fingers wrapped around the mug. *If he expected a thank you, he'd be sorely disappointed.* "I like cream in my coffee."

"Too fucking bad," Chris shot at her. "I drink my coffee black, so I didn't bring cream. You should have thought of that when you packed to come here."

She had thought of it. In fact, she'd thought of everything. Unfortunately, she'd only been able to handle one piece of

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luggage when she was forced to leave her car behind and climb the snowy hill to the cabin. The bag of groceries was most certainly frozen solid in the trunk of her car by now.

She'd waited until the last possible minute to tell her brother she intended to spend Christmas alone but she'd been planning the trip to the cabin for days. In fact, the plan fell in place soon after she realized Linda had been playing her for a sucker all along.

She'd kept it to herself for fear Jimmy would talk her out of spending Christmas alone. Family was everything to him. Christmas without Winter was unthinkable. Never mind the fact that she was twenty-nine and had proven time and time again that she could manage just fine without him.

Christmas had always been a very special time with her family as Winter grew up. When her parents died, Jimmy quickly took over the role and made sure every Christmas was special.

She loved her brother too much to tell him it was never the same after their parents died. For the past several years, she'd played along, let him believe he really had made the holiday season special.

There'd only been one special Christmas since her parents died ... the one she'd spent with Jeff.

She had no desire to ruin Jimmy's Christmas but this year, she really needed to be alone. She'd called her brother as she was heading out of town to inform him of her plan to spend the holidays alone at the cabin. When he tried to talk her out of it, she said she loved him, hung up and shut her cell phone off.

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Now as she stared at Chris, she wished she'd listened to Jimmy. Christmas with a man who had so much reason to hate her had very little appeal. Just how was she supposed to sort things out when the reason she needed to be alone shared the same small space with her?

Winter took a small sip of her coffee and sputtered. "Holy shit," she cried as she peered into the jet-black liquid in the mug. "Just how much instant coffee did you put in this?"

Chris' eyes narrowed. "Are you complaining?"

"No," Winter said quickly. "It's just very strong."

"So you won't need a second cup," he said.

She watched as he reached for a book and opened it. He flipped through until he found the right spot, settled deeper in the armchair and began to read. *The bastard!* He seemed perfectly comfortable with her presence. And why not? He'd had a restful night's sleep while she was stuck on the lumpy couch.

She closed her eyes and took another swig of the coffee. It wasn't so bad once she got used to the overbearing taste. She swallowed slowly and gazed at him. Watching a man read a book was going to get boring pretty darn fast. "So, is this what you plan to do all day?" she asked.

Chris' eyes lifted from the book. "We're stuck in a small cabin during a storm," he said. "Do you have something better in mind?"

"No, not really," Winter replied. Her mind whirled. What the hell had she been thinking anyway?

"Oh, come on, Knight," Chris said. He put his book aside and gazed back at her. "You weren't counting on having

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someone here anymore than I was. Since we're stuck with each other for the foreseeable future, what would you like to do?"

"Forget I mentioned it," Winter said.

"No can do," Chris said. "I'm willing to bet a woman like you can't go too long without screwing a man."

Winter struggled to put her coffee mug aside without spilling it. She took a deep breath, trying to keep her hands from quaking. "I will not justify my job to you," she said tightly.

"Oh, did you think I was talking about your job?" Chris asked. "Sorry for the misunderstanding. I was talking about the fact that you probably hope I'll fuck you."

Winter sputtered as she leapt up from the couch. "You wish!" she cried. "Aren't you just the typical man? Thinking with the wrong head is the main reason I fleeced you in court."

Chris stood and towered over her. His eyes narrowed as he peered down at her. "Are you sure you want to go there, Ms. Knight?" His voice was ominously soft, daring her to push him just a little further.

A sense of excitement coursed through her body as she looked up at him. *God, he was so damn sexy!* She felt her body warm, her core dampen just slightly, as she stared up at him. She wanted to close her eyes, to let him take her in his arms and show her just how masterful he could be. She wanted to feel his fingers slide over her, his lips on every part of her body.

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God, how she wanted to push him, to force him into acting on what was reflected in his emerald gaze. He wanted her; there was no doubt about it. He wanted her with the same primal urge she felt pool inside her.

Winter took a step back. "No," she said finally. "I expect I don't want to go there."

Chris watched her for a long moment, his face unreadable. She swallowed hard, expecting the worst, before he finally replied. "I think that's wise," he said. "Very wise."

Winter hadn't realized she was holding her breath until Chris turned and walked back to the armchair. Air whooshed from her lungs when he sat down and picked up the book he'd been reading. She stood watching him for a long moment, almost afraid to move. When he continued to ignore her, she slowly went back to her place on the couch and picked up her mug of coffee.

Her heart pounded in her chest. She didn't want to admit to just how excited she'd been moments before ... or how disappointed she was when Chris backed away.

\* \* \* \*

*The room was basked in candlelight when Chris walked inside. He blinked when he saw Winter laying on the bed. She was on her back, her hands cupping her breasts. She looked up at him, her eyes blazing with desire. She pulled her knees up and opened her legs to expose her moist pussy. Chris stood stark still, gazing down at her as she slowly slid a hand from her breast over her abdomen to her sweet core. She smiled up at him as she spread the lips of her vagina open.*



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*"Do you like my pussy, Chris?" she asked, her voice low and hoarse with desire as her fingers slid over her slick core.*

*When he nodded numbly, she said, "Then come here."*

When he approached, Winter quickly rose on the bed, kneeling in front of him. Her eyes blazed as she opened his jeans and reached inside to cup his cock. She nuzzled it as her fingers massaged his balls. He closed his eyes when her mouth touched the tip and slowly sank over him.

His hands dug into her hair, holding her in place as she sucked and lapped. "Oh yeah, babe," he said through clenched teeth. "That's so damn good."

Winter's breathing became labored as she continued to pump him. Chris' hands fell from her hair as she quickened the pace.

*Seconds before he knew he'd explode, his hands cupped her shoulders and shoved her. She cried as she fell backwards, landing spread-eagle on the bed. Chris didn't waste a moment, he dove on top of her, knocking the breath out of her lungs as he landed. He didn't wait to drive his cock inside her slick pussy. Her body welcomed him, urged him to take her. He winced as her fingernails dug into the flesh on his shoulders. Her legs wrapped around his waist, beckoning him to drive his cock into her harder.*

"Wake up, shithead!" He'd heard the words in the distance and slowly opened his eyes.

He frowned and looked down at the book on his lap. "I fell asleep?"

"Yeah," Winter replied. "I guess the excitement of sharing the cabin with me got the best of you."

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Chris peered up at her. "I was having a very nice dream," he said. "Why did you wake me?"

"Because it's almost five and I haven't eaten anything other than the package of cheese and crackers I found in my suitcase. I'm hungry!"

He looked at Winter. *Shit!* So was he! Though he suspected she was talking about food while he was thinking of her flesh. Thank God the book covered his cock.

He tried to keep the book over the protruding bits of his jeans as he rose from the armchair. Her gaze slid from his face to the strategically placed book. Her brows lifted. "Just what were you dreaming about?"

*Damn it!* He tossed the book aside. Why hide it? It wasn't like she could go running from the cabin while the storm raged outside. She had nowhere to go and might as well know how she affected him.

Her brows rose and she gazed at the hard-on pressed against the fly of his jeans. She whistled. "Must have been one hot dream," she said.

Chris had to admit he was disappointed by her glib response. He decided to turn it up a notch. "I was dreaming about fucking you," he said.

His cock wilted when she smiled. "Then you'll have to feed me first," she replied. "I'm too hungry to think about fucking any man, let alone you."

Chris' blood boiled. *The fucking witch! When the time was right, she was so going to pay the price!* He'd see to it that she'd beg for him.

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"Hello?" Winter broke into his thoughts. "Are you still here, or do I have to call 911?"

Chris gazed at her through hooded eyes. "Gotta go out to start the generator," he said absently. "Then we can cook something on the stove." As he retrieved his coat and started for the door, he stopped briefly when the witch had to nerve to say...

"Well, hurry up!"

Chris grinned as he opened the door. Oh yeah, he was looking damn forward to giving her exactly what she deserved!

### Chapter 3

Winter took one last bite of steak and pushed away from the table. She patted her rounded stomach in satisfaction.

"I take it the meal was acceptable?" Chris asked from across the table.

Winter gazed at him. The meal had been more than acceptable. She'd eaten a large sirloin steak, baked potato and a healthy helping of steamed baby carrots. "It was a very good meal," she said cautiously. There was no point in letting it go to his head.

Chris slowly rose from the table, his gaze pegged on her. "Then I guess we should consider dessert."

Winter frowned. They'd made dinner together but there'd been no mention of dessert. She looked at Chris as he approached her. "Do you have a stash of chocolate?" she asked. "I'd love some chocolate."

The moment his hands closed over her shoulders and pulled her off the chair, she knew what he was talking about. "I have something much sweeter in mind."

Winter felt her body sing with sexual awareness as she allowed him to lead her to the couch. "Don't you remember what you didn't have the strength to do before you had something to eat?"

*Oh God!* She'd told him she couldn't fuck a man unless her stomach was full! "Chris," she said nervously. "You know I wasn't serious."

Chris' eyes blazed as he pushed her down on the couch and quickly followed her. His hand touched her jaw as his

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intent look examined her face. "You are a beautiful woman, Winter Knight," he said softly.

Winter closed her eyes as his fingers slowly slid around her neck and pulled her closer to him. "What about the fact we hate each other?" she asked softly, almost breathlessly.

She sighed when his lips brushed hers and slowly made their way over her cheek to her ear. "Hate is such an ugly word," he whispered.

Winter's hands settled on his chest. She knew she should be pushing him away; that what they were doing wasn't right. And yet, when she felt the firm muscles in his chest contract under her touch, she couldn't help herself. "Okay, hate is a strong word," she replied. "But you can't deny—"

Chris' hands slipped behind her and pulled her against him. "You can't deny we're attracted to each other," he said.

"Well, yes. But—"

Chris cut her off again, this time with a low growl. "Shut up, Knight."

Winter moaned when his lips crushed hers. *God!* She wasn't used to being told what to do by any man, but he felt so darn wonderful. Her mind whirled as she felt the sheer power his body eluded. It was more than muscular power; it was confidence and downright arrogance, all the qualities she disliked in men. And yet, she couldn't deny that deep down, she felt drawn to him like a moth to the flame.

She reveled at the contours of his muscular chest as he pinned her beneath him. And, oh Lord, his hands as they snaked beneath her sweater and slowly slid up her back made her body rock with passion.

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*by Peggy Hunter*

To hell with her misgivings! There was nothing wrong with enjoying the moment. There'd be lots of time to reason it out later. Right now, she needed his touch, every fiber of her being begged for his unforgiving strength.

She sighed when Chris' hands skittered to her front and his palms settled over her breasts. She felt the warmth of his hands through the thin nylon fabric; her nipples jutted forward to greet his touch.

"Hmm," he whispered against her ear. "You want me as much as I want you, don't you, babe?"

God, how she hated being called 'babe', yet when Chris uttered the word, it wasn't nearly as annoying as it had been in the past. "Yes," she hissed as she let out a long breath.

"Do you want me to suck your nipples?" he asked as his fingers massaged her breasts.

"Mmmm." It was the only sound she could manage. Her hands had delved beneath his sweater and were sliding over his sinewy back.

Chris chuckled. "You'll have to do better than that, babe," he said. "Do you want me to suck your tits?"

She finally found her voice. "Yes!"

He pulled away from her long enough to pull her sweater over her head and toss it aside. When the hooks of her bra wouldn't give way to his fingers, she chuckled softly and pushed her hands behind her to unhook it. But Chris didn't want to wait. He shoved the cups of the bra over her breasts and slid his hands over them. When the hooks gave way to her ministrations, he didn't seem to notice. His eyes blazed at they focused on her breasts.

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"They're much fuller than I expected," he said absently. "Heavier in my hands."

Before Winter found her voice, he leaned down and took one erect nipple into his mouth as his fingers continued to tease and roll the other. His lips closed over it and sucked hard, nipped it with his teeth and swirled his tongue around it before he released it. He raised his head for only a moment before he began the process again.

"Good?" he asked as his lips released her again.

"Yes." It was the only word she could manage as her mind whirled in sheer ecstasy.

When his tongue dragged from one breast to the other to begin the sensual assault over again, his hands slid over the fly of her jeans and worked to unbutton them. He growled softly when they didn't give in to his will.

"I'll help you with that under one condition," Winter said.

Chris pulled his mouth from her breast and rose slightly. Emerald eyes glimmered as he peered down at her. "Name it."

"Strip."

Chris laughed out loud. "Is that the challenge?" He lifted from the couch and stood over her. His fingers curled under his sweater and pulled it off. He tossed it aside before his hands went to the fly of his jeans. "Okay," he said. "I'm willing to take the rest off but I want something from you in exchange."

"You already know you've got me," she said. "What's left?"

Chris smiled slowly. "So you figure all that's left is fucking you?"

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*by Peggy Hunter*

Winter frowned. "Well, yes. How much more can there be?"

"So you agree to my demands?"

Winter's body cooled. Suddenly, she was very afraid of what Chris might be talking about. In the past, sex had always been the basic act. Foreplay had been about the man getting off on touching, rubbing and generally drooling over her. "I don't know if this is a good idea," Winter said as she began to rise from the couch.

When Chris pushed her back down, she glared up at him. "I know you want me as much as I want you," he said. "All I need to know is if you're willing to let me show you just how sweet it can be."

"What do you want from me?"

"Take your jeans off and spread your legs. Let me taste your pussy."

"Oh ... God, Chris..."

When Chris hooked his fingers into his jeans and pulled them off, her eyes focused on the massive bulge in his briefs. He smiled. "Your turn."

Winter squeezed her eyes closed and undid her jeans. She pushed them over her hips and let them fall on the floor. She slowly opened her eyes to find Chris' eyes focused on the thin layer of fabric covering her core. He took a deep breath, pushed his briefs over his hips and stepped out of them. His cock fell forward, massive, hard and throbbing with lust. There was no need for more words. Her clit swelled with the desire for his touch, her core heavy with moisture. She ached



for him. She quickly slid her panties off her hips and tossed them aside.

"I know you want me to fuck you," Chris said as he sank to his knees beside the couch. "But I need to taste you first."

Winter watched as Chris pulled one leg over the side of the couch and lifted the other over its back, exposing her to his gaze. He smiled as he cupped her mound. She winced when his fingers gently pulled strands of the hair surrounding her core. "I can't believe it," he said. "Even your pubic hair is strawberry blond."

He didn't wait for Winter to reply before he leaned down and touched her with his lips. She gasped when his mouth closed over her and again when his tongue pressed through the lips of her vagina and lapped against her tight opening. "Mmmm," he murmured as his hands slid up her inner thighs. "You taste even better than I imagined. Like sweet wine."

Winter cried out when his fingers joined his mouth in the assault. As his tongue whipped against her clit, his fingers slid over her slit and tested her with slow, small strokes inside. His breathing became heavier, fanning against her lower abdomen as his fingers dipped deeper. Winter gasped and raised her hips in an attempt to pull his fingers deeper into her core.

Her legs left their designated places and wrapped around his waist as his tongue and fingers continued to pulse against her. With each stroke, Winter felt closer to orgasmic oblivion, the likes of which she'd never experienced before and one she had no idea she needed until this very moment.

The Knight Before Chris  
*by Peggy Hunter*

Chris' mouth left her clit and touched down against her abdomen, slowly sliding his way up her torso as his fingers continued to plunge into her. He slid through the valley of her breasts before his lips closed over her mouth. Her lips opened for him, welcomed his tongue into her mouth as she continued to buck against his hand.

Chris ripped his mouth away from hers long enough to say, "Do you want my cock, Winter? Do you want to feel it inside you?"

She nodded, unable to find the words. His mouth closed over hers again as he pressed his legs between her thighs. His fingers dug into her flesh as he pushed her legs over his back.

And then she felt his cock push into her. At first, it felt as though her body were being split in two as a ramrod sword sliced into her. Her inner core stretched to receive him, only because she'd been given no choice.

She swallowed hard and closed her eyes tight against the pain.

"Ah, babe," he said softly. "You're so tight. I'm sorry it hurts."

"I'm okay," Winter said. After all, she'd been dealing with shitty sex all of her adult life. So what if she'd found a man with a penis too big for her to take? "Just go ahead."

"We'll just wait for the pain to subside," he said. "In the meantime, I'll feast on your breasts again."

He held his cock still inside her as his lips closed over her nipple. The moment she felt his teeth graze it, the need she felt for him began to rise again. He sucked and lapped, lapped

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and sucked, popping one nipple out of his mouth and moving to the other.

Winter's hands framed his face and pulled him away from her breasts. He looked down at her in question.

"Kiss me like you mean it," she said.

Chris smiled. "What was it about my previous kisses that made you think I didn't mean it?"

Winter shook her head. "I don't know," she said. "I just need to know you aren't just fucking me. Kiss me like you mean it."

She wasn't sure. Did she see something, perhaps hesitation, flit across his handsome face? His lips covered hers before she had a chance to analyze the moment further. Her hips moved forward, accepting him, needing him.

"Sweet, sweet Winter," he said when his mouth tore away from hers. He buried his cock inside her as far as it would go. She squeezed the muscles surrounding him as he slowly pulled out. He moaned in sheer pleasure before he drove into her again.

Her legs tightened around him as he dug his fingers into her hips with each pounding stroke. "That's it, babe," he said. "Give me all you've got."

And Winter did, she pushed upward with every stroke, each one taking her closer to the edge every time. "Oh," she cried, her voice vibrating from her chest as he continued to slam into her.

"Don't hold back, babe," he said.

Her body contracted around him, her head swam and whirled as she gave him all she had. Suddenly, she felt her

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body give into a million bursts of orgasmic release. The shock vibrated through her and focused on their union, contracting hard over his swollen member.

"Jesus!" Chris howled as his cock gave way and quickly emptied inside her, filling her with his white-hot passion.

## Chapter 4

Chris woke up on the couch. He looked around until his tired gaze located Winter near the cabin door. *What the fuck was she doing?*

"Hey," he said sleepily.

Winter didn't look back as she pushed her feet into her boots and shoved her arms into her coat. "Hey," she answered bleakly.

*Oh fuck!* She was mad at him. He rolled his eyes and sat up. "Okay, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said stiffly.

He was willing to bet her next words would be 'if you don't know, I'm not going to tell you.' He rose from the couch. "I don't play that game." Linda had discovered that soon after they married. "Either you tell me what the fuck is up your ass, or we don't talk about it at all."

She kept her back to him as she buttoned her coat. "You fell asleep seconds after," she said.

*Oh shit!* Okay, seems he did. "Babe, I'm sorry."

Winter whirled around and pegged him with an angry blue glare. "First off, I despise being called 'Babe', so you can drop that right now!" she said sourly. "And secondly, I tried to wake you but you were dead to the world. I had to drag myself out from under you and sleep in your bed. I don't know what you weigh, but it was like pulling out from under an elephant."

"Assuming you have any idea how heavy an elephant is," Chris replied sardonically.

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"Fuck right off!" Winter wailed at him. "You made me feel like a piece of meat last night. You got what you wanted and didn't consider my feelings."

"Give me a break!" Chris countered. "Don't try to tell me there was nothing in it for you. Just because I didn't cuddle and tell you how wonderful you were after we had sex doesn't mean shit. You liked it as much as I did."

Winter gasped and turned to the door. "Go to hell, Donnelly."

"I will just as soon as you tell me where you're going."

Winter turned to look at him. "It's the day before Christmas," she said. She peered at him as though he should suddenly understand. When he returned her gaze with a blank stare, she rolled her eyes. "I'm going to find a tree."

Chris laughed. "You figure you can cut down a Christmas tree?"

Winter's blue eyes hardened. "Are you suggesting I can't?"

Chris bit back another laugh. "No, of course not. There's an ax near the woodpile. Go to it."

He had mixed feelings when Winter slammed the door behind her. A chivalrous man would insist on going with her. And the skies he glimpsed out the window weren't looking kind. More snow was on the way and soon.

But he'd also learned from past experience that Winter Knight didn't like to be told what to do. True, she'd been a giving, if not willing, lover the night before. But who knew how long she'd gone without having sex? She might have acted out of sheer desperation, just the primal need to be screwed. He imagined someone like Winter didn't have the

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opportunity pop up on a regular basis, no matter how incredibly sexy she was. The moment she opened her mouth, a man's cock would wilt to the point of disappearing.

Chris looked out the window and saw Winter trudge through the deep snow, an ax in one hand, the other splayed out for balance.

*To hell with the bitch.* He hoped she froze her sweet ass off trying to find a Christmas tree.

He grabbed the book he'd been trying to read for the past several days and settled in the easy chair.

*Fuck!* He hadn't meant to fall into such a deep sleep after making love last night. Fact was the past two weeks had been hell on wheels. He'd had little sleep as he attempted to salvage what little was left of his architecture company, as well as pay the final amounts to his ex-wife.

Sure, he'd used Winter. He unloaded and then felt depleted.

*Shit! Why not?* As Linda's lawyer, she'd been hounding his ass for almost two years. There was certain poetic justice in fucking the living hell out of her.

Chris opened his book and tried to focus on the words. Winter couldn't have expected anything more from him. After all, she banked a hefty amount of money after the divorce was finally settled. As far as he could tell, she still saw him as the shitty husband Linda claimed he was. So why should he feel guilty? And why should it bother him that she went out to find a Christmas tree when severe weather loomed?

Chris tossed the book aside and went to the kitchenette. He dumped a large teaspoon of instant coffee into a mug and

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padded to the kettle over the fire in the hearth. He filled the mug with steaming water and slowly walked to the window. The clouds on the horizon looked greyer and angrier than the last time he'd looked.

*Shit!* He'd have to go after the witch. If for no other reason than the fact he was her brother's best friend. Jimmy would never forgive him if harm came to his precious kid sister.

Chris set his mug aside and reached for his boots and coat. Yeah, he liked that reasoning best of all. It was much easier than admitting he had feelings for her, that Winter Knight meant more to him than the sexual satisfaction he'd found with her the night before.

\* \* \* \*

Winter's teeth chattered as she pulled her coat tighter against her chest. The stupid designer buttons fell off her stupid designer coat the first time she found herself snagged in brush as she walked through the snow-laden forest. And never mind her stupid designer boots! Her feet were frozen solid soon after she'd left the cabin. The only reason she'd been able to continue walking was because her feet were numb.

Instinct told her to go back to the cabin the moment she yanked her coat off the thorny branches and saw the black buttons spray across the white ground. But determination told her otherwise. She expected Chris would call her bullheaded. She didn't care what he thought. It was the day before Christmas and while she may not have reason to celebrate,



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she still wanted a Christmas tree. And damn it, she'd find one!

Besides, after what happened between them the night before, Winter needed to get away from him. She needed time to gather her thoughts, decide which way to go. Chris had been an amazing lover, better than she'd ever known in her life. But the fact remained that he was Linda's ex-husband and she had helped the woman fleece him for millions of dollars.

She should have felt her client had been vindicated; she should have enjoyed her good fortune when she banked the hefty fee she'd earned when the divorce was finalized. She would have, too, if only she hadn't walked into the women's restroom at the courthouse when she had.

Winter saw a small, snow-covered fir tree and approached it. She wiped snow off a few branches and stood back. It looked like the perfect tree, one that would stand tall and regal in the cabin and bring a small amount of joy to an otherwise bleak Christmas.

She walked toward the tree and reached between the branches. She winced and hunched her shoulders as she shook it. She shuddered as the snow billowed around her. When it finally settled, she took another step back and looked at the tree again. Its branches bowed down slightly, the tips brown and stale. Gaping holes, ones that no amount of decorating could cover, appeared. What looked like the perfect Christmas tree under the guise of snow, turned ugly when she inspected it further.

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Winter sighed. If only she'd used the same logic when she accepted Linda as a client. She imagined Linda as a tree covered in pristine white snow. She'd come to Winter begging for help, desperate to take from the marriage what she'd put into it. Winter felt she was entitled to much more and talked her into going for it.

Poor Linda, she was reluctant at first, claimed she didn't want to hurt her husband. God, if only Winter knew she'd played right into the witch's hands!

Well, Winter was a bit wiser now. Perhaps it was only a Christmas tree she was seeing with new eyes, but she'd consider her next client in the same light. Snow over the branches was deceiving ... there was an untold story hidden beneath.

The perfect Christmas tree was out there somewhere and Winter was determined to find it. She grabbed the ax and continued through the woods, each step taking her further from the cabin.

The wind picked up, slashing against her cheeks as she bowed her head and trudged on. She finally found herself in a small clearing. The brush surrounding the area kept the cold wind at bay. And there, in the middle of the clearing, she saw the tree.

Laden with snow, there was no way to tell if it was suitable without shaking the snow off the limbs. Her heart sang, knowing she had found the tree she wanted as she loped through the snow toward it. She brushed snow off the limbs and stood back to examine it with a critical eye. The branches were full, perfectly shaped.

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There were no gaps between branches, no stories left untold. The needles were bright green and healthy. She pried a needle from a branch and raised it to her nose. It smelled fresh, clean, untouched. If only she'd been able to use the same tactics when she met Linda Donnelly.

This was it. This was what she'd set out to find. She raised the ax over her shoulder and swung it toward the base of the tree.

"Nice tree." The familiar voice came from behind and startled her. The ax faltered in her hands as she swung and it thudded into the snow a few inches from the base of the tree.

Winter released the ax handle, letting it fall to her side as she turned to face Chris. "What the hell are you doing here?" she asked.

Even in his thick fleece coat and a wool hat pulled tight over his head, the man looked sexy as ever. "Figured I needed some fresh air," he said. "I wasn't following you."

"Sure," Winter said sarcastically. The jerk probably thought she couldn't cut a tree down on her own. "I think I can manage," she said as she turned back to the tree.

"Fine," Chris replied. "So you won't mind if I keep walking."

"Not at all." Shit, she wished he'd walk off the face of the earth!

She waited for him to disappear before she took another swing at the tree. This time the ax hit the base of the tree and quickly bounced off. The force vibrated from her hands to her arms and then throughout her entire body. She yelped as

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she fell backwards, the ax falling at her side as snow plumed around her.

"Are you sure you don't want some help?" She heard the humor in his voice.

Winter grappled in the snow before she finally decided the best way to get up was to roll onto all fours. She rose slowly and pierced him with a cold glare. "I thought you were getting some exercise," she grumbled as she got up.

"I was," he said. "I came back when I heard you scream."

"I didn't scream," she said indignantly. "And I don't need your help."

She was surprised when Chris planted his feet in place and folded his arms. "Okay," he said. "Far be it for me to argue with you. Think I'll just stand here and wait for you to cut the tree so we can go back to the cabin."

Winter bit her lower lip as she gazed up at him. He was acting far too smug for her taste.

His face broke out in a smile. Her eyes narrowed. "What's so amusing?"

"You're chewing your bottom lip," he said. "I've learned in the past two years that means you aren't certain about what you're doing."

Winter quickly released her lip and pierced him with cold eyes. *Damn him anyway!* "I'm sure you think you know my every move," she said as she reached for the ax and turned back to the tree. She sure as hell wouldn't let him believe she wasn't capable of cutting down a Christmas tree! She bent slightly and raised the ax over her shoulder, preparing to land a crushing blow.

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"Well, I wouldn't say I know your every move," Chris replied. "But after fighting you in court, I learned a lot."

"You don't know squat," Winter growled as she tightened her grip on the ax.

"Until yesterday, I'd have agreed with you. And then I learned you like the way I suck your clit."

Chris stumbled and the ax fell at her feet. She twisted and looked at him sourly. "I'd rather not talk about last night."

"I suppose you wouldn't," he said. "After all, you have a reputation to protect. God forbid anyone should know you liked it when I sucked your nipples or how you screamed when I pushed my thumb inside you."

Winter struggled to force his sweet touch from her mind. His hands on her naked flesh, his hot mouth kissing and trailing over her entire body ... and his massive cock sinking deep inside her ... "I'd love to feed your fantasies," she said, "but I want to cut this tree and get back to the cabin."

"I couldn't agree more," Chris said as he moved forward. "I'd like to get back to the cabin, too."

When he grabbed the ax, Winter's grip tightened. "Hey, piss off!" she cried. "I'll cut the tree."

"It's taking too damn long," Chris countered as he attempted to pull the ax out of her grip.

When she felt the ax slip from her gloved fingers, Winter threw herself at Chris in anger. "Give it back!" she wailed.

Chris lost his footing. The ax flew to his side as he teetered backwards. At the very last second, his hands wrapped around her waist and she tumbled with him. Snow billowed around them and Chris' arms held her tight to his chest.

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Winter blinked in surprise and attempted to roll off him. His hands held in her place. He smiled up at her. "Well, well. Can't wait long enough to get back to the cabin?"

"Fuck you!" Winter cried as she attempted to roll off him.

Chris' chest vibrated as he laughed. "That's exactly what I had in mind."

Winter struggled to keep her wits about her. The warmth of his body, so close to hers, made her mind whirl with need. *Don't give in! Don't let him win!* "Let me go," she said through clenched teeth. "Even if I wanted to have sex with you, it's too damn cold out here."

"Is it?" Chris said, then his lips touched hers. He discarded his gloves before his hands dug beneath her thick coat. Warm hands slid beneath her sweater and softly kneaded the flesh of her back.

Winter moaned as his lips covered hers. What little willpower she had quickly ebbed away under his heated touch. His hands slowly glided down her back to the band of her jeans. She braced her knees in the snow on either side of his hips in order to allow his fingers to open her jeans. She moaned when his fingers flowed down, skimming under the rim of her panties. She sighed against his mouth as his hands cupped her buttocks.

She knew she should stop this madness; that no good could come from this. And yet, her body sang beneath his heated touch.

Winter's gloved hand reached between them and settled over his ramrod strength. She ached to touch him, to nuzzle him against her cool cheeks. She tore her mouth from his and

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sat up. He chuckled when she ripped the gloves off her hands with her teeth and tossed them aside. She fumbled with the fly of his jeans but managed to pull it open. He hissed when the cool air hit his rock-hard penis.

"You should know it's true about the cold and a man's erection," he said.

Winter shimmied down his body, then her hands cupped him. He wouldn't feel the cold for long. He moaned when she quickly closed her mouth over him and gently massaged him with her teeth and tongue.

The snow beneath his hips squeaked as he raised his hips to meet her lips. Winter was vaguely aware of her warm breath steaming in the cold air as she continued to suck his engorged cock. He tasted so good, his strength filled her mouth almost to the point of overflowing.

Chris sighed heavily and placed his hands on either side of her head. He urged her upward, dragging her down over him again as his mouth closed over hers. He released his lips from hers and gazed up at her face.

"You have an amazing mouth," he said softly. "And I look forward to a time when I can fully enjoy it. But it's too cold out here and I need to sink my cock inside you."

Winter laughed as he pushed her jeans over her ass. She barely noticed the cold air against her bare hips as his fingers sought her out.

"I never knew being swallowed whole by a barracuda could be this damn sweet," he said.

Winter felt as though a pail of icy water was suddenly tossed over her body. She wanted to ignore his words; she

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wanted to feel something other than anger. She wanted to feel him move inside her and never look back.

But his fingers digging into her core suddenly felt cold and intrusive. She wanted to cry, to scream, to flail her hands against his chest!

Winter quickly rolled off him and grappled in the snow. She rose and quickly snapped her jeans closed.

"What?" Chris blinked up at her in disbelief. "What's wrong?"

Winter shook her head and quickly made her way down the path back to the cabin. She could try to explain, but she suspected Chris wouldn't understand. After all, she'd earned the reputation in court. Why wouldn't he think of her as a barracuda when they made love?



## Chapter 5

Chris grumbled as he lugged the tree behind him through the snow. Winter had quickly left him lying in the snow, needing her like he'd never needed anyone before.

*The bitch!*

Maybe there really was something to the rumors about her and the last man in her life. Maybe he should be counting himself lucky she'd gone down on him and left his cock intact.

So why did he bother to cut the tree she'd picked out and pull it back to the cabin? It wasn't as though she'd thank him for it. In fact, he fully expected her to chew his ears off when he dragged the tree into the cabin.

Okay, so he'd had time to figure things out. Winter left because he'd called her a barracuda. She'd made it clear when they met that she hated that particular name.

*So what?* It wasn't as if she'd never heard it before. In fact, when reporters surrounded her after the settlement had finally been reached, they'd referred to her as barracuda more than once. She'd smiled for the cameras, said that justice had been served. No man, not even someone as high profile as Chris Donnelly, would get away with screwing over his wife.

So what was the big deal when he'd used the name? Was it possible there really was a chink in the armor she'd so carefully surrounded herself with? Was it really possible the name hurt?

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*by Peggy Hunter*

Chris got to the door and stopped. His hand hovered over the doorknob as he pondered the questions going through his head.

*Naw.*

The Winter Knight he'd come to know over the past two years was made of sturdier stuff. Something else had drawn her away. Shit, maybe she'd come to her senses at the last moment, realized she'd gone down on a former client's ex-husband. There was probably some conflict of interest at play there.

Chris chuckled to himself as his hand settled on the doorknob. He stopped again as something new occurred to him. So why had he dragged the tree home? What had he hoped to accomplish?

It was a peace offering, something to soothe the savage beast ... or at the very least, allow him within spitting distance.

Until a couple nights ago, he thought Linda had sucked the very life out of him. Since they'd split up, more than a few women had shared his bed. But none affected him the way Winter had.

Chris was no fool. He knew his attraction to Winter was about the power she'd wielded over him while she was Linda's lawyer. And he was fully aware he'd finally found a way to possess her. There was a certain measure of satisfaction in putting it to a woman who had put it to him for so fucking long.

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Chris shouldered the door open and pulled the tree inside. He saw her sitting on the couch with her back to him, as he closed the door and shucked out of his boots and coat.

He rubbed his hands together and blew on them. "Shit, it's cold out there," he said.

Winter went rigid but didn't reply.

Chris took a step closer to her. "Did you see those clouds overhead?" he said. "There's more snow coming soon. No telling how long we'll be holed up here."

Silence.

"I brought the tree."

Nothing. Winter continued to sit with her back to him. Her head rolled back slightly. Her hand lifted and disappeared in front of her face. And then, he wasn't sure, but did he hear a sniffle?

*Fuck! Is she crying?* Had he actually made the barracuda cry? Was that even possible?

His hands fell to his sides as he walked toward her. She sniffled again and dabbed her eyes with a tissue. Chris shook his head. There was only one thing to do. He leaned down and placed his ice cold hands on her cheeks.

Winter screeched and bolted from the couch. She peered at him with angry, glossy eyes. "What did you do that for?" she wailed.

Chris blinked at her tear-stained cheeks and puffy red eyes. His heart ached. He wanted to draw her into his arms and tell her he'd make everything right. "I'm sorry," he said numbly. "I shouldn't have called you the barracuda earlier."

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Chris winced when Winter glared at him. "Are you so full of yourself that you think that word hurts me?" she asked. "Do you know how often I've heard it?"

"I expect you've heard it many times," he said. "But how often have you heard it from a lover?"

Winter laughed sarcastically. "What does that mean? Do you really think you're my lover?" Her eyes pierced him with anger. "Don't fool yourself, Donnelly. What happened between us last night was a mistake—"

"What happened this afternoon wasn't," Chris said, cutting her off. He tried to rein in his anger. "Let's not forget the fact that you went down on me."

Winter opened her mouth and then snapped it closed. Chris smiled. "Kind of hard to explain that one, isn't it?"

Winter turned to the fire and tossed her tissue into it. Her eyes were hooded when she turned back. "What's your point?"

Chris expected she had no desire to hear it. He'd won the battle but the war would rage on. He took a deep breath. "So let's call a truce for tonight," he said. "It's Christmas Eve after all."

Chris didn't realize he was holding his breath until Winter's face softened. "All right," she said finally. "Good will to men and all that rot."

He let his breath out slowly and turned to the tree. "First thing we need to do is find something to put this tree in."

He smiled as he dragged the tree further into the cabin. He wasn't sure how he'd accomplished it, but at least Winter was

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being civil. It was definitely the first step toward talking her into his bed.

\* \* \* \*

Winter grinned as she pushed a needle through the popcorn and looked up at Chris' handiwork. "A little more to the left," she said.

Her grin deepened when Chris frowned and leaned down to grab the base of the tree to move it slightly. "How's that?" He looked at her with hope.

Winter frowned as she speared another piece of popcorn. She glanced at the tree and frowned as she pushed the popcorn over the needle and slid it over the long length of thread. "Maybe just a smidgeon to the right."

Chris glared at her. "What the fuck is a *smidgeon*?" he asked.

Winter shrugged. "In this case, half an inch or so."

Chris shook his head as he backed away from the tree. "Half an inch isn't going to matter," he said. "Either you like it where it is, or you can move the fucking thing yourself." His hands braced his lower back. "I've been bent under that thing since we stuck it in the pail an hour ago. My back's aching."

Winter grinned. "Poor baby," she murmured.

Chris' eyes narrowed as he looked down at her. "Somehow, I don't think you feel sorry for me."

"Somehow, I think you're right," she shot back. She motioned to the bowl of popcorn. "Sit down and help me string this stuff. It's not like we have anything else to decorate the tree with."

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"I beg to differ," he said.

Before she could question him further, he disappeared into the bedroom and quickly returned with a cardboard box. She frowned when he opened it and pulled out several long strands of garland, mini lights and boxes of ornaments.

"You son of a bitch!" she cried. "I've been stringing popcorn for the past hour when all the while you knew there was a box of decorations for the tree in the bedroom?"

Chris' eyes twinkled. "My mom used to string popcorn for the tree," he said as he looked at the strands at her feet. "I thought it would make a nice addition."

Winter remembered the frail woman testifying against Linda in the first year of their divorce battle. Clearly, she'd been very sick, yet she'd come to court to tell the judge how Linda had used her son. She'd only made the one appearance. She'd been summoned a second time but was excused because she had been too ill to appear.

Winter picked a large red ornament from the box and placed it on the tree. She winced but felt compelled to ask. "How is your mother?"

Chris let out a long breath as he strung the popcorn strands on the tree. "She died a year ago."

Winter's heart constricted. Linda had portrayed Madeline Donnelly as the witch who had been at the base of their problems from the start. Winter had to admit, she'd never been convinced her client's accusations were true. Looking back, she should have seen Linda's venomous accusations against Chris' mother as the first sign.

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Linda knew Chris's mother was fighting breast cancer and showed no concern for the woman. The one time the woman testified on her son's behalf, Winter raked her over the coals, skillfully twisting her testimony to suit Linda's case. The experience had clearly tired the woman almost to the point of near unconsciousness. The bailiff had to assist her from the witness stand.

Winter remembered the moment as if it happened just yesterday. She'd stood in front of her desk, smug and self-assured, as the bailiff assisted the old woman to her seat. As Mrs. Donnelly passed by, her eyes connected with Winter's. Rich emerald eyes pierced her with anger, blazing with contempt. Her body was frail but her eyes still burned with fiery life. If she'd been able, Winter was sure the woman would have lunged for her throat.

"I'm truly sorry," Winter said softly.

Chris shrugged. "Why?" When Winter didn't reply, he added. "You didn't know her." He reached for another ornament and turned to the tree. "I've made my peace with it."

Winter swallowed hard as she averted her gaze. She'd used every trick in the book to downplay the woman's testimony. She'd eventually managed to convince the judge that Mrs. Donnelly would say anything to protect her son.

As they placed the last ornaments on the tree and stood back to admire it, Winter looked at the man at her side. She needed to know more. "Tell me about your mother," she said softly.

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Chris looked down at her, his eyes unreadable. "When I was a kid, we had hot chocolate after we finished decorating the tree on Christmas Eve. After we hung our stockings up, we'd sing Christmas carols until bedtime."

Winter grinned. "I should warn you, I can't carry a tune."

Chris grinned as he walked to the woodstove and pulled the kettle of boiling water off. "That's okay," he said. "We don't have milk to make hot chocolate anyway. You can choose between tea and instant coffee."

Winter raised her brows lightly. "Herbal Tea?"

Chris frowned. "I've got tea or instant coffee," he repeated.

"Tea."

Chris poured hot water into a mug and plunked a teabag into it. "Should probably start the generator for a few minutes so we can see the tree lit up."

"Long enough for the water to heat up so I can take a shower?" Winter asked hopefully.

Chris pondered for a moment. He nodded softly. "Well, it is Christmas Eve," he conceded. "I think it's okay to splurge." He grabbed his coat and shoved his feet into his boots. "It takes about half an hour for the water to heat up. One quick shower and then I'm shutting it off. I only have three cans of gas left for the generator and we don't know how long we'll be holed up here."

"I know, I know," Winter said eagerly. "We have to conserve as much as possible."

"Right, we enjoy the lights on the tree for half an hour; you have a two minute shower and that's it."



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Winter smiled. She'd prefer a few minutes longer but she wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. "Right."

## Chapter 6

With the fire raging in the hearth and the mini lights twinkling on the Christmas tree, Winter and Chris sat on the couch in silence. Winter took another sip from her cup of black tea and glanced at the man sitting less than a foot away from her. "I really am sorry about your mother," she said softly.

Chris let out a long breath and took a long drink from his mug of coffee. He looked at his watch and then back to the fire. "Another ten minutes and the water should be hot enough for a shower," he said.

Winter winced but felt the need to speak her piece. She pressed on. "I knew your mother was sick when she came to testify," she said softly.

She chanced a glance at Chris. He continued to stare into the fire, his green eyes blazed with intensity in the firelight. She saw his brows furrow; his jaw set in a firm line. Yet he didn't reply. Now was the time to tell him how sorry she was for everything.

"I want you to know how sorry I am about your mother," she said. "I only met her once but she so clearly loved you."

Chris' Adam's apple bobbed in his throat, his eyes narrowed.

Winter pressed on. "I know your father left shortly after you were born and your mother raised you and your brothers on her own. I know it was a struggle for all of you."

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She chanced a look at him. No reaction. "I also want you to know I always doubted Linda's accusations that your mother started the problems between you—"

That got his attention. He turned to look at her, his green eyes blazing in the firelight. "You doubted it?" he asked, his voice low and menacing. "Yet you had no problem raking her over the coals. Do you have any idea what you and Linda did to her?"

Winter swallowed hard. "I did what I had to do to win the case," she said. "At the time, I had no reason to believe your mother." She hesitated before she added, "Nor you, for that matter."

Chris shot up and walked toward the hearth. He kept his back to her as he spoke. "So what does that mean?" he asked. "Are you trying to apologize for what you did?"

Winter grappled with his words. At the time, she'd done what she'd been hired to do. *Was it a mistake?* Yes. But did she have a reason to offer an apology when, at the time, she'd only done what she'd been hired to do?

*No! No! No!*

It was her misfortune to come upon Linda and the pool boy in the bathroom in the courthouse. If she'd left, she never would have known the truth, would have felt she'd found vindication for another woman who'd been shit on by her husband.

How could she tell Chris now? After everything that had happened, how could she admit she'd been wrong?

"I'm not apologizing," she said finally. "But I am sorry about your mother."

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A long silence followed—a deafening, heart-wrenching stillness. "The water should be hot enough for your shower now," Chris said finally.

\* \* \* \*

Water sluiced over her body as Winter turned her face into the spray overhead. Her heart ached. She'd made an attempt to make things right with Chris but knew her efforts were only half-hearted. She'd been unable to admit how wrong she was for representing his ex-wife and essentially ripping his life to smithereens. She couldn't fault Chris for not acknowledging her meager effort.

The warm water offered some relief as she reached for the bar of deodorant soap. Not her choice for cleansing but she was grateful for the opportunity to shower and wasn't about to complain. Winter rubbed the bar of soap into a cloth and then ran it over her abdomen and slowly lifted it to her breasts. Her nipples budded and ached as she slowly, methodically rubbed the cloth over them.

The cloth slipped from her hands as she cupped her breasts, reveling in the cascading water and slowly moved her hands over her torso. Her fingers slid over her core to her backside as she turned to let the spray of warm water glide down her back. She pressed her hands on the wall of the shower stall and arched her back.

She felt cold air wash over her as the shower curtain was suddenly pulled aside. She gasped as she glanced at Chris.

His eyes blazed with desire as he spoke. "Your two minutes are up," he said.

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Winter turned and pressed her back against the shower stall. Her hands slid up and cupped her breasts as she stared back at him. "Yes," she said softly. "But I'm not done yet. What will it take for you to give me a little more time?"

Chris' eyes blazed as he quickly took his clothes off and stepped into the shower. His hands braced her buttocks and pulled her against him. "What have you got in mind?" he murmured.

"That depends," she said innocently. "What do you need?"

Chris growled as he dipped his mouth over her lips. "Let me show you what I need," he said before his mouth settled over her lips.

Water sluiced over them as Winter drank from his lips, taking everything he had to give her. Her breasts crushed against his chest as his long legs splayed on either side of hers. His iron-hard cock pressed into her belly as his fingers slid down her back.

He tore his mouth from hers and gazed down at her. "You have no idea how much I need you," he said through clenched teeth.

Winter closed her eyes, unable to find the words to respond. She needed him too, more than he could ever know. His hands cupped her buttocks and lifted her with little effort. She felt his cock slide against her belly and find the juncture between her thighs.

He wrapped her legs around his waist and pressed his cock against her folds.

Winter pushed her head against the shower wall. Her eyes were closed against the stream of water coursing over her

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face. She needed him. She needed him more than she'd ever needed anyone before. So why was her body cooling? Why had his touch felt so damn cold against her skin?

"Fuck!" Chris' hands left her buttocks and gripped her hand as he pulled her out of the shower stall. Winter screamed when she felt ice cold water spray over her back as she leapt from the stall.

Chris pushed her aside and reached into the shower to turn off the taps. Winter blinked as she gazed up at him, her body shivering. "What happened?"

His voice echoed in the small room. "I guess we ran out of hot water."

Winter grabbed a towel and wrapped it around herself. "You said the generator would heat the water," she said as she grabbed another towel and wiped her face.

"It did," Chris supplied. "But it'll only heat the water in the tank. A small water heater only heats a small amount." He grabbed a towel and began to wipe his face.

Winter's gaze washed over his naked body and quickly settled on his penis. She put her hand over her mouth in an attempt to stifle a giggle.

Chris looked at her as he wiped his chest. "What's so funny?"

"I guess what they say about shrinkage really *is* true," she said, unable to hide her laughter any longer.

Chris peered down at himself and then back at her. His face lit with mischief as he continued to towel himself off. "You find that amusing, do you?"

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Winter attempted to make a straight face. "Not at all, Chris," she said. Laughter bubbled up inside her again as she continued. "In fact, I find it hilarious!"

Chris' grin deepened as he tossed the towel aside and took a step toward her. "Maybe I should teach you a lesson about laughing at a man's misfortune."

Winter snickered and backed against the door. She reached behind her and grabbed the knob. "Are you sure you mean misfortune?" she asked. Her gaze flitted down to his penis. "Or do you mean a man's shortcomings?"

"I'll show you shortcomings!" Chris' face lit up with amusement as he lunged at her.

Winter laughed and screamed as Chris' fingers curled in the towel wrapped around her. She managed to open the door and tear out, the cool air coasting over her body as she ran.

Winter rounded the couch as Chris tossed her towel aside, his gaze burning over her naked body. "Come here and take your lumps," he said menacingly.

She giggled and shook her head. "Oh, I don't think so," she said. "You'll have to make me."

Chris grinned devilishly. "That'll be my pleasure," he said as he headed for the couch.

Winter cried when he climbed over the couch and landed on the floor in front of her. She ducked his hands and raced for the bedroom. She pushed the door open and ran inside. She turned to see Chris saunter to the door.

His eyes blazed with desire, his smile wicked as he leaned against the doorjamb. Winter's breath came in short gasps as

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her nipples peaked and her core moistened. Chris' sheer strength filled the room, and her body with need. Her gaze slid to his maleness. The shock of cold water no longer affected him.

"Well, well," he said softly. "Seems you have nowhere to hide."

The game was far too much fun for Winter to give up that easily. "You'll have to catch me first," she said, taunting him.

Chris pushed off the doorjamb and walked toward her. Her heart thundered in her chest as she waited for him to round the bed and close the distance between them. She could feel his body heat the millisecond before she acted. She flew on top of the bed in an effort to escape.

She squealed when she felt his hands close around her ankles and pull her feet out from under her. Winter fell on the soft mattress face first, laughing as she struggled in his grip.

"No fair!" she cried as Chris quickly planted his knees on either side of her hips and held her down with his hands on her shoulder blades.

She felt his lips blaze over the back of her neck. "All's fair in love and war," he growled, his hot breath brushing her skin, his tongue scorching a trail down her back and up again. His hands left her shoulders and slid down her sides. They curled over her waist and pulled her buttocks against his aching need.

*Was it love, or war?*

The thought disappeared from Winter's mind when she felt his iron cock wedge into the flesh of her buttocks. Her body



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hummed as Chris' fingers slid over her, his mouth hot against her back.

She arched her back, allowing his hands to slide over her breasts. "Sweet Winter," he said against her ear. "You have no idea just how much I want you."

Reason filtered through her brain long enough to know one thing, it wasn't her personal being that he wanted. It was *the barracuda*, the woman who had raked him over the coals for two long years; the one who had made his life a living hell.

She knew she should stop him, push his hands away, tell him it wasn't right. But as his lips continued to scorch a path down her back, his fingers slowly made their way to her core. His weight pulled off her as he braced his knees between her thighs. She took the cue, raising her hips from the mattress and splaying her legs, inviting him, aching for his touch.

"Oh!" Winter felt her body convulse against him as he ran his thumb over her clit.

"You like that?" he asked, his voice breathy against her ear.

"Yes," she said, trying to keep her ardor in check.

"Do you want more?" he asked. "Do you want my fingers inside you?"

Winter winced as she arched her back against him. "Yes," she hissed.

Her body cried out for more when his hand suddenly left her core and settled on her buttocks. Her face fell into the cushion of the mattress as she pressed her ass against him.

Chris slid his cock between the cheeks of her ass and pushed them tight over him. "Beg for it," he said.

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Winter wanted to scream. He would not play that game with her! He wouldn't get away with it!

Yes, she wanted him. Yes, she needed him. But she wasn't going to be his whore! Not now, not ever!

Winter's fingers curled into the blankets and suddenly bucked upward. The movement caught Chris off-guard and afforded her the opportunity to slip off the bed. She landed with a thud on the floor.

She grimaced at him when she got to her feet. "You fucking son of a bitch," she said. "You'll never make me beg for anything!"

Chris lunged forward and grabbed her. She cried out as he pushed her back down on the bed, this time on her back.

Chris made short work of her struggle as he forced her arms over her head. He grinned triumphantly, never saying a word.

"Bastard!" she cried as she struggled against him, loving his power, his sheer force as he held her down.

"Uh-huh." His mouth dipped to take an erect nipple into his mouth. His teeth grazed against it before he sucked it into his mouth.

She made a half-hearted attempt to escape his grasp and Chris' hands held her with equal force. He knew she wanted to be dominated and was more than willing to give her what she needed but his grip let her know all she had to do was say the word and he'd back away.

For the first time in her life, Winter felt secure with a man. She knew he was willing to take her to new heights but wasn't going to push her beyond her comfort zone.

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Her body relaxed beneath him as she struggled to free her arms. "Let me touch you!" she pleaded.

Chris released his hold on her arms and groaned when she slid her hands over his back. Her hands settled on his firm buttocks and curled into the flesh, pushing him against her aching need. "Fill me with your cock!" she pleaded as she bucked against him. "Chris, I need you!"

"I need you, too," he said as he wrapped her legs around his hips and pushed into her core. "Sweet, sweet Winter," he whispered urgently.

Winter howled in sheer pleasure as she felt the blunt force of his cock open her. Every fiber of her being felt complete as his cock filled her depths, taking everything she had within her, splitting her wide open in sweet agony.

"Chris! Oh my God!" she cried as he moved against her, digging deep into her core and then, slowly, methodically, pulling away. Her mind reeled in pleasure as her body screamed for more. She drove her hips forward to meet his thrusts, their bodies smacking together in a carnal dance.

Chris grabbed her legs from his waist and pulled back from her. His cock fell away as he kneeled between her legs.

"No!" she cried, her body pulsing with need for him.

"Don't worry." She felt his knees against her thighs as he moved closer to her. His hands gripped her ankles. "We aren't done yet."

She winced when his hands slowly pressed against her ankles, pushing them aside, opening her core to him. His hands held her feet in place as his cock nudged against her.

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"You want me to fuck you, don't you?" he asked, his cock pulsing against her slick opening.

"Yes," she said.

Chris' hands pushed her legs wider. He leaned over her slightly. "What? Not sure I heard you."

"Yes!" she cried.

She felt the sweet pressure of his cock against her slit. "What was that?"

She couldn't take it anymore! She didn't care what he was after, what he wanted from her. She needed him right now!

Her voice vibrated off the walls of the bedroom. "Fuck me!"

Her plea was met with sheer joy. He filled her with his cock, pulsating, filling her completely. Tears sprang to her eyes when Chris let her legs fall onto his shoulders as his hands slid over her abdomen. She lifted her hips with every thrust, taking every inch of him as his balls slammed against her.

Chris leaned over her as his fingers massaged her stomach. With every thrust he made, his fingers slid closer to their connection. When his touch settled over her clit, Winter felt her body climb toward a pinnacle.

"Give it to me," he said through clenched teeth. "Give me everything you've got."

Winter's body seared with extreme pleasure, lifted to his touch, so near the perfect completion. She felt it build with every stroke.

Her hand dove between them, finding their source, touching the base of him as he drove into her. She wanted

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him too; she needed him to give her everything as well. Her fingers formed a V around the base of his cock as he drove into her.

Winter felt the sweet agony as her body gave itself up to him. Her hands left his body and gripped his buttocks, pulling her close to him as the explosion wracked her body.

Chris winced; a guttural oath escaped as an orgasm wracked his body. He pulsed against her, filling her core with his white-hot force.

\* \* \* \*

Winter woke and pried herself out of Chris' arms. He moaned softly but didn't wake up. She padded out of the bedroom to the kitchen. She poured a glass of water and took a long drink. She peered at the clock on the wall. It was just after midnight. It was Christmas Day.

She walked back to the bedroom and looked down at the sleeping man in her bed.

"Merry Christmas, Chris," she said softly.

She so wanted to crawl back into the bed, to touch him, make love with him again. But she knew she couldn't. Her conscience had let her get away with far too much already. No matter how much she wanted Chris Donnelly, the honorable, if not ethical, thing to do was to back away.

She quickly dressed and stuffed what few belongings she had into her suitcase. She grabbed a sheet of paper and scribbled a few lines before she donned her coat and boots.

Snow fell heavily as she walked out the door. She winced against the wind as she began to walk. With any luck, she'd

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be able to dig her car out of the snow and head back to the city tonight.

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Chapter 7

*Chris,*

*I've decided to grant your wish and let you spend the holidays alone.*

I wish you only the very best for the future. Merry Christmas!

*Winter*

Chris held the note up to the firelight and read it a second time. *She left? What the hell?*

He crumpled the note and tossed it into the fire before he walked to the bedroom to retrieve his watch. He held it in front of the hearth. It was just after one in the morning.

The bed felt cold when he woke half an hour ago. He thought Winter had gone to get a drink of water but when she didn't return, he crawled out of bed to find her. The winter wind battered the windows as snow flew around.

*What the hell was she thinking? Did she really think she'd be able to find her car and get back to the city during a storm like this?*

There was no question about it. He had to go after her. Her sweet scent still lingered in the cabin, so she couldn't have been gone long.

Chris's heart pounded as he quickly dressed before he filled a hot water bottle from the kettle steaming over the fire. He grabbed a wool blanket and shoved everything into a backpack. He put two teaspoons of instant coffee into a thermos and used the rest of the hot water from the kettle to fill it.

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Chris located a flashlight and tucked it into the back pocket of his jeans before he got into his coat and boots.

Snow billowed through the door when he opened it, driving into his face, sending a shiver down his spine.

He had to find her. *God! If anything happened to her...*

The words echoed in his mind as he pulled the door closed behind him and peered into the night. If something happened to her ... what? What did she mean to him?

He wasn't sure.

If nothing else, Jimmy would never forgive him if something happened to his sister. That was reason enough to go after her. There was no need to analyze his feelings for Winter any further.

Chris stood at the door for a moment before he walked to the small shed beside the cabin. He pushed the door open and pulled the flashlight out of his pocket.

"There it is," he said softly as spotted the toboggan against the far wall. If Winter was hurt, it'd be easier to drag her back on it than carry her through the deep snow.

The flashlight did little good against the blinding snow driving against him as he trekked down the hill. With each step he took, his boots filled with more snow, making it harder to walk.

He stopped and leaned against a tree as he pulled one boot off to empty it. With his weight on one foot, it sank deeper into the snow. He removed the backpack and placed it on the toboggan as he struggled to get his foot back into the boot.



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"Fuck, Winter!" he howled in anger. "When I get my hands on you..."

The words trailed off when he heard, rather than saw, the toboggan slowly slip away down the hill. He lunged forward in an attempt to catch it. Suddenly, he felt the cold bark of the tree slam his forehead. The world began to spin in a blinding whirl of white snow and visions of Winter before everything went black.

\* \* \* \*

Chris moaned as Winter leaned over him. His eyes focused past her to the roaring fire as she cleaned the gash over his right eye.

"Am I dead?" he asked as his gaze settled on her.

"I wish," she said angrily.

Chris winced when she pressed white gauze over his wound. When he reached up, she softly slapped his hand away. "Lie still," she said. "You have a cut on your forehead. I've got to dress it."

"What the hell happened?" he asked.

Winter's eyes pierced him as she pursed her lips. "Seems you did battle with a tree," she replied. "The tree won."

"And you found me?"

Winter nodded as she placed another piece of tape over the bandage.

"How did you know I went after you?"

Winter shook her head as she put the bandages and tape back into the first aid kit. "I didn't," she said. "At least, not at

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first. I was just a few feet away from my car when a toboggan came out of nowhere and mowed me down."

"Oh shit."

Winter grimaced. "Yeah, that's what I thought."

When Winter was about to walk away, Chris grabbed her wrist. She turned to look down at him. "Were you hurt?"

She pried her wrist out of his grip. "Do I look hurt? I was startled more than anything."

"Why did you come back?"

Winter shrugged and walked to the arm chair. "Well," she said when she sat down, "I didn't have much choice. I figured the toboggan couldn't have made it down the hill alone and there was a chance you were hurt. I couldn't leave you to freeze to death while I went back to the city. So I headed back up to look for you. I rolled you onto the toboggan and brought you back. End of story."

"I set out to save your life and you ended up saving mine," he said softly. The irony wasn't lost on him.

"Well," Winter said as she rose from the armchair, "Let that be a lesson to you. I don't need to be saved."

Chris sighed. "All right," he said. "But why did you leave in the first place?"

Winter's eyes pierced his. "It's four in the morning," she said as she turned and walked to the bedroom door. "Get some sleep."

Chris was clearly too tired to press her any farther. He closed his eyes.

Winter pressed her back to the closed bedroom door and gave way to the tears which had threatened to spill for the

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past two hours. Every muscle and bone in her body ached, but none more than her heart.

When the toboggan slammed against her legs, the suitcase she'd been lugging flew in one direction while she went in the other. After she climbed out of the snowbank she'd been hurled into and retrieved her suitcase, she saw the toboggan lying against the mostly buried front grill of her car.

She knew Chris had found the note soon after she'd left the cabin and set out after her. Her heart was in her throat when she found his crumpled form. Relief coursed through her when she pressed her finger to his throat and felt a strong pulse.

It had been no easy task to get him back to the cabin. The toboggan often gave way to his weight and sank into the deep snow. Yet the only stop she made to rest was when she finally got to the cabin door. And even then, the rest was short-lived before she dragged him off the toboggan, into the house and hoisted him onto the couch.

It wasn't until she was cleaning the gash over his right eye that a heartbreaking thought occurred to her. How had she found the strength to get him to safety? She'd heard of such heroics before—the man who'd lifted a car off his son; the woman who fought a mountain lion to save her daughter.

And then it dawned on her. She loved him.

She was in love with Chris Donnelly!

Winter sank to the floor as tears flowed freely. How could she have allowed this to happen? How could she have been so damn stupid?

\* \* \* \*

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*by Peggy Hunter*

"Wake up, sleepyhead."

Winter groaned as she opened her eyes. She saw Chris standing over her. "Go away," she mumbled as she pulled the blankets over her head.

"Not gonna happen," he said cheerfully. "It's Christmas Day."

"Big deal," she said. "Do you have any idea how little sleep I've had?" she said when he pulled the blankets off her face.

God, she'd cried for what seemed like hours before she finally pulled her aching body off the floor and crawled into bed.

"Besides, both of us came to the cabin to avoid the holidays," she added as she attempted to pull the blankets back over her.

Chris chuckled as he tossed the blankets to the foot of the bed, well out of her reach. "True enough," he said. "But since we're stuck with each other, we might as well enjoy it."

"I don't care what you say," she grumbled as she rolled onto her stomach and buried her head under a pillow. "I'm not getting out of bed."

"Who said you had to get out of bed?"

Winter peeked from beneath the pillow. "You did."

Chris smiled. "No, I didn't," he said. "I just said you had to wake up."

Winter regarded him warily. "What's your game, Donnelly?"

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Chris held a bottle of baby oil up for her to see. "I found this under the sink in the bathroom," he said. "Merry Christmas."

She frowned as she reached for the bottle. "Well, gee, thanks. No one's ever given me an old bottle of baby oil for Christmas before."

Chris chuckled and held the bottle out of her reach. His eyes twinkled wickedly. God, she loved his eyes, so expressive, so mischievous. All he had to do was look at her and her body reacted with passionate need. "I'm giving you a full body massage for Christmas."

She hated how the promise of his touch turned her to jelly. She hated how she could so quickly forget their problems the moment he smiled at her. She hated how much she needed him.

Winter closed her eyes and tried to summon the voice of reason. *You're the lawyer who helped his ex-wife screw him out of everything he ever worked for.* The voice of unreason quickly stepped up to the plate. *So what? You were doing your job.* Reason spoke again. *But you're not working now and you're keeping what you know from this man. He deserves to know the truth.*

Chris broke into her thoughts. "Take your clothes off, Winter. I want to run my hands all over you."

The voice of unreason laughed victoriously as she quickly pulled her clothes off. *I win this round.* Reason quickly replied, *That's all well and good. I'll still be here when you come up for air and you'll only feel worse about what you're doing.*

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*by Peggy Hunter*

The voices in her head quickly disappeared when Chris' oiled hands slid over her back. "Mmmm." Her body hummed as his fingers curled over her shoulder blades.

"I thought your muscles might be aching after what you went through last night," Chris said, his voice soft and soothing.

"They are," Winter said, barely able to keep from sighing as his fingers worked the knotted muscles at her neck.

"I still can't get my mind around the strength you found last night," Chris said as his fingers slowly slid down her back. "I imagine your legs are feeling it, too."

Winter moaned when his fingers slid over the back of her legs and gently pushed against her aching muscles. She groaned. "That feels wonderful."

"Shut up and let me do my job," he said as he continued to work the muscles in her calves.

Winter was quite content to do just that as Chris' deft fingers slowly worked the baby oil into her tight muscles. He covered every inch of her body, from gently rolling her toes in his fingers to slowly pressing against the aching muscles in her neck.

"Roll over."

Winter sighed and did as she was told. She kept her eyes closed as his fingers gently kneaded her shoulders and slid over her breasts to her abdomen, her hips and then moved down her legs, working every muscle until the pain eased away. His slick fingers gently moved back up her body and circled her breasts.

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Winter's body warmed as his fingers gently massaged her breasts.

"Do you like that?" he asked softly.

"Mmm, yes."

"And what about this?" He pinched her erect nipples between his fingers and rolled them.

"I like that, too," she said.

"I love your breasts," he whispered. "Soft, yet firm. They fit in my hands perfectly."

As one hand continued to massage her breasts, the other spread her thighs. "And I love your thighs. They feel like silk."

He crawled onto the bed and sat on his knees between her legs. His hand slid over her stomach to the tuft of hair between her thighs. "But I love your pussy the most," he said as his fingers slid over her and slipped over the slick warmth. "I love how tight it is, the way it holds my cock when I'm fucking you."

Winter gasped and raised her hips off the bed to greet his fingers as they hovered over her moist chasm, silently begging him to follow through with the erotic promise his fingers made.

Chris pressed his fingers against her, slowly circling the opening. "Do you want me to finger fuck you?"

"Yes," she cried as she bucked against his hand.

Chris leaned over her and planted a lusty kiss on her lips. She opened her eyes to see him smiling down at her. "I will," he said. "But I want to feast on your pussy first."

Winter's breath caught in her throat when he moved down her body and positioned himself between her legs. His eyes

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darkened as he placed his hands on either side of her and pulled her pussy open with his fingers. She gasped when he dipped his head and stroked over her clitoris with his tongue. "Mmmm," he said, his breath hot against her core. "The best Christmas breakfast I've ever tasted."

The chuckle Winter felt bubble in her chest was quickly replaced with a moan when Chris returned to the task at hand. The bandage on his forehead pressed into her sensitive skin as his fingers pulled the lips of her pussy wider apart. She cried out when his tongue slid from her clitoris to her slit. He curled his tongue and pushed it into her.

Winter's hands flew to his shoulders. Her fingers curled into the soft fabric of his shirt as he pressed his tongue inside her and slowly pulled it out. Her hips bucked against his face as every stroke brought her closer to an explosive orgasm.

"Chris!" she wailed, her body convulsing in sweet ecstasy, barely able to keep herself from going over the brink of sanity.

Chris moved upward and formed a seal over her clitoris with his lips. His tongue stroked as he sucked. He pressed two fingers inside her, pushing as far as his hand would allow, stroking her delicate folds as his mouth continued the assault on her clit.

"Oh God!" Winter cried as she buried her fingers in his hair. She knew she couldn't handle much more, yet she felt powerless to stop him.

Chris rose and gazed at her when he pushed a third finger inside her. His thumb pressed against her clit as he smiled at her. "Let it happen, babe," he urged. "Don't fight it."



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Winter screamed as the world around her whirled and the orgasm wracked her body with torturous convulsions.

As she lay panting on the bed, she pried her eyes open to find Chris still sitting on his knees between her legs, a bright smile on his face, his eyes twinkling in satisfaction. She raised her head slightly and attempted to return the smile.

"Merry Christmas, Winter Knight," Chris said.

Winter attempted a gentle chuckle but her body was too depleted to respond. She let her head fall back onto the pillow as she continued to gasp for air.

## Chapter 8

Chris whistled softly as he set the table for dinner. He'd had the generator running all day to cook the small turkey in the oven and prepare the rest of the Christmas feast.

As Winter showered and dressed, Chris checked the vegetables steaming on the stove and whipped the potatoes.

"Can I help?"

Chris turned to see Winter just inside the kitchen door. She looked positively radiant. Her skin glowed in spite of the fact she was devoid of makeup. *That's what good loving did for a woman*, he thought as he smiled back at her. "There isn't much to do," he said. "I think I've got everything under control."

Winter walked toward the stove. She opened the oven door and inhaled. "Smells glorious," she said.

The turkey wasn't the only thing that smelled glorious. Winter's fragrant skin filled his senses and reminded him that he'd abandoned their bed without finding his own satisfaction earlier today. His cock ached to bury itself inside her, to take every bit she had to give him and demand more.

The time would arrive soon. Just as soon as they had dinner, he fully intended to extract a very special Christmas gift from her, one that would leave both of them breathless.

Winter closed the oven and peered into the pans on the stove. She uncovered the corn, then the mixed vegetables and stopped when she looked into the last pan. She looked at him in surprise as she replaced the lid. "You made gravy?"

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Chris grinned. He reached for an open can on the counter and held it up. "Yep," he replied. "With a little help from," he turned his gaze to the can to read the label, "*Mrs. Green's Canning Company.*"

Winter's sweet laugh wrapped around him as he grinned back at her. God, he loved the sound of her laugh. He loved her voice, too, and the way she moved ... and those incredible deep blue eyes and damn, her delectable body. In fact, he wasn't sure what he didn't love about her ... well, other than her fucking job, anyway.

*Love?* Did he just attempt to find something he didn't love about Winter Knight?

Chris felt as though someone had just sucker punched him. *Whoa, boy, hold up! What the hell am I thinking? There's no way I can love Winter. After all, look at what she'd had a hand in doing to me!*

"Chris, are you okay?"

Chris shook the thoughts from his head and realized Winter was standing in front of him, a hand on his chest as she peered up at him anxiously.

Chris took a step back and shook his head. "Yeah, I'm fine," he said.

"Are you sure?" she pressed. "For a minute there, you looked like you were about to faint."

Chris snorted.

"Well okay, maybe not faint," Winter conceded. "But you were as white as a ghost. Maybe it's a delayed reaction to your head injury."

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*by Peggy Hunter*

When Winter reached for the bandage on his brow, he quickly pushed her hand away. The last thing he wanted was for her to touch him. "I'm just hungry," he said. "Help me get dinner on the table so we can eat."

\* \* \* \*

After dinner was put on the table, Chris shut the generator down, explaining they needed to conserve as much gas as possible. The light from the hearth coupled with the candles on the table lent a romantic glow to the evening.

Yet Chris seemed distracted all through dinner. He chatted with her but was preoccupied, as though something was bothering him.

"This is a wonderful meal," she said as she speared the last of the gravy-soaked turkey on her plate.

"I'm glad you like it," he replied.

Winter cast her gaze toward the window. "Looks like the snow has stopped."

"Yeah," Chris replied. "It stopped early this morning while you were still asleep."

Winter placed her fork beside her plate and peered across the table at Chris. "If the storm is over, it won't be long before the roads are plowed."

Chris sipped his wine. "I guess so."

Winter's heart ached. Their time together was limited. Perhaps as soon as morning, they'd have no reason to stay here at the cabin any longer.

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Guilt weighed heavy on her soul. She knew she had to tell Chris the truth soon. He had the right to know and the sooner she got up the nerve to tell him, the better.

As they cleared the table, Winter struggled to find the words. Nothing would come to her. After everything she'd put him through the past two years, how could she tell him she'd been wrong all along?

When the table was cleared, Chris walked passed her and sat on the sofa. She peered at him. *Hell, what good could come of telling him anyway? Wouldn't knowing the truth only add salt to his already festering wounds?*

And what about her? Little by little, inch by inch, Chris had gained respect for her. She knew they had no future together but did she want to ruin what time they had left by telling him the truth?

Already her body longed for his touch. The idea of never feeling his skin against hers again made her ache for him.

She did have to tell him the truth, if only for her own good. But there was no harm in delaying it for just a bit longer. She'd tell him the truth tomorrow. Tonight, she wanted him ... needed him like she never had anyone before.

Winter took a deep breath and walked to the hearth. She turned and gazed down at Chris as he sat on the sofa. His troubled glance connected with hers.

"I know there's something bothering you. There are things bothering me too," she said softly as her fingers gripped the hem of her sweater. "But this is Christmas. Reality will come crashing down on us soon enough. So for tonight, no problems exist." She whisked the sweater over her head and

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tossed it aside. Her eyes darkened as she unzipped her jeans. Her fingers snagged her silk underwear as she pushed the jeans over her hips and kicked them aside. "Tonight," she continued, "there's just you and me," her hands cupped her breasts as his gaze smoldered over her, "and all kinds of possibilities."

"Possibilities?" Chris asked. "Do tell," he said as he watched her sachet toward him.

Winter stopped in front of him and leaned down. Her fingers curled under the hem of his shirt and pulled it over his head. "I'm more than happy to share what possibilities there are," she said as she cast his sweater aside. "But," she said as she sank to her knees, "I'd much rather show you."

When Winter unzipped his jeans, he raised his hips to allow her to pull them, and his briefs, off his body. She tossed them aside blindly as her gaze focused on his hardened need.

Breath hissed from his lungs as her fingers curled around his penis. "I love your cock," she said as she leaned down, nuzzling it with her cheek. "It's so hard and demanding but the skin is so soft." Her fingers slid over him to the base. "And I love how you fill my hands when I hold you."

His eyes twinkled lightly as she gazed up at him. "So size really does matter, huh?"

Winter grinned but didn't reply. There were some things a woman didn't divulge, no matter how turned on she was. Size was one of them. This was probably their last night together, so she didn't want to cast doubts or shatter any of his illusions.

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Instead, she dipped her mouth over his girth. Her lips slipped over the throbbing head of his penis and slowly slid over the shaft.

Chris moaned softly as Winter's teeth grazed the soft flesh of his firm cock. "God, that's so good," he said as he allowed her full access to him.

Winter's fingers wrapped around the base of his cock and slowly pumped as her tongue laved and sucked him. She pulled away and gazed up at him. "Is that good?" she asked innocently, knowing his answer before he replied.

"Yeah, it's good," he said, his voice hoarse with desire. "You know what I need."

Winter's eyes watched his face as her tongue slid against him. "Do I really know?" she asked. "Is this what you need?" Her mouth took him in again, this time sucking harder, her teeth grazing him with each stroke.

Chris buried his hands in her hair, gently pushing her head down on him. "You tease," he said. "You know damn well how good it is."

Yes, she did. Winter knew she was bringing him more pleasure than she'd ever given any man in her life. She wanted to. She wanted him to enjoy her touch as much as she had his over the past few days. The end was coming soon, sooner than she wanted. When he walked away, she hoped he'd at least remember that she'd given him something he'd always remember ... even if he walked away hating her more than he did before they'd met.

The thoughts spurred her on, her fingers pumped harder as her mouth tightened around him.

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She winced when his fingers tightened in her hair. Her lips smacked as she pulled away and peered up at him. "Did I hurt you?"

Chris chuckled softly as his hands curled under her arms and pulled her up. "No," he said. "But you were on the verge of getting a mouthful if I'd let you go on much longer."

"I don't care about that," Winter said as he effortlessly pulled her onto his lap.

"I do," he said as his hands circled her waist and pulled her closer to him.

Before she could protest further, Chris lips closed over hers. She willingly drank from him as his hands roved over her body. When they settled on her hips and pushed her down over his hardened penis, Winter felt her body open to greet him.

She moaned softly when her body opened to him, as she felt him slice through her moist depths and thrust deep within her. Her knees sank into the cushions on the couch on either side of him as he filled her completely. She braced her hands on his shoulders; her head fell back as she enjoyed his solid need as it stretched the inner folds of her body.

The first shock wave overtook her when Chris moved against her. His hands gripped her waist and pulled her down against him as his hips bucked upward. The second shock wave slammed her when she leaned forward and braced her hands on the back of the couch. With her body at a slightly different angle, his cock felt bigger, more demanding somehow. His breath felt hot on her breasts as his fingers dug into the flesh of her hips.



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When Chris suddenly pushed her away, Winter glanced down at him in surprise. He smiled up at her in reassurance. "Turn around," he said.

Winter didn't say a word but her uneasiness must have spoken volumes.

Chris winked at her. "Trust me," he said.

She didn't stop to analyze her thoughts. She slowly rose and turned her back to him. "Now what?" she asked.

Chris answered her question without uttering a word. His hands wrapped around her waist and pulled her down over him. His cock slid over her slick pussy.

"Grab my cock and guide it in," he said urgently.

The different angle felt strange to Winter but she did as he instructed. She had to adjust her stance over him, leaning forward slightly before his cock met its mark.

When his cock slipped into her, Winter moaned and leaned further forward, bracing her hands on his knees as he bucked against her hips.

"Yeah, babe," he said as he pumped upward. "God, that's good. I love fucking you this way."

Winter couldn't find words as the new position filled her senses. Hurting, yet glorious.

Just as she adjusted to the new position and began to push against his thrusts, he changed things again. His hands closed over her breasts and pulled her to his chest. Each upward thrust created new sensations as his fingers pinched and rolled her nipples.

Winter was on the verge of losing control when his hand grasped hers and pressed it to their connection. His fingers

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stroked her clit as hers felt the base of his cock buried deep inside her.

She cried out in ecstasy. She felt her body tighten and convulse around him as he gave way to an orgasm. Tears sprang to her eyes as she felt his white hot liquid fill her. Her vagina contracted around him, milking every last drop he had to offer before she leaned back and collapsed against him.

Chris' arms wrapped around her waist and held her tight against him as he pulled her down on the couch. She could feel the thrumming beat of his heart against her back as he gasped to draw air into his lungs.

"I love you," she said.

"Hush," he said softly. "Don't let your emotions run away with you."

It wasn't exactly the reaction she was hoping for. When she tried to turn to face him, his arms pulled tighter around her, holding her in place. "There's something you need to know."

"Not tonight," Chris said. "There's nothing I need to know tonight."

"But—"

"Shut up, Knight," Chris said. "Whatever it is will keep till morning. Go to sleep."

## Chapter 9

Winter woke when she felt sunlight cascading over her. She opened her eyes slowly and peered around her. Bright sun shone into the bedroom window, soaking the bed with sweet warmth.

It took her a moment to remember how she'd gotten there. She'd fallen asleep on the couch with Chris but sometime later, she woke to find herself being carried to the bedroom. There, she and Chris made love again.

But now she was alone. A sound outside drew her attention. She pushed the covers back and padded to the window. She squinted and shaded her eyes as a flash of metallic red came into view. Her car!

Winter quickly dressed and ran into the kitchen. She stopped in her tracks as Chris walked in the cabin door.

"Good morning," he said casually as he removed his coat and boots.

"Good morning," she replied in kind. "I see we've been dug out of the snow."

Chris nodded but still didn't make eye contact with her. He walked to the stove and poured coffee into a mug. "Yep," he said blithely. "I heard the snowplows early this morning and walked down to dig your car out. There's no need for you to stay a minute longer."

Anger coursed through Winter's body. *That was it?* After what they'd shared over the past few days, even after confessing her love for him, she was being dismissed like a naughty school girl? *I don't fucking think so!*

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*by Peggy Hunter*

"You know," she said through clenched teeth, "there's still the fact you invaded my territory. You're the one who should leave."

Chris shook his head and finally made eye contact with her. Winter was stricken by what she saw. His eyes were dull, blank; no feeling touched them at all when he replied, "I'm not about to engage in another debate about that. Now that the sky has cleared, I was able to use my cell phone to contact your brother. He's anxious to see you," he said. "And so are your sister-in-law and niece and nephew. Seems they put Christmas on hold for you."

"I'm not leaving—"

Chris' ceramic mug slammed on the counter. He seemed oblivious to the hot, dark coffee that splashed over the countertop and onto the floor as he nailed her with cold green eyes. "Yes, you are!"

Winter's heart tightened. She walked to the bedroom and quickly filled her suitcase with her clothes. When she walked back into the kitchen, she dropped the suitcase on the floor and peered at him. "Fine," she said. "I'll go. But there's something I have to tell you first."

"I'm not in the least bit interested in what you have to say."

Winter held her ground. "If you want me to leave, then you'll hear what I have to say."

Chris poured more coffee into his mug and rested his hip against the counter. She watched as he took a long, deep swallow. "All right then," he finally said.

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Winter's gaze fell to her feet as she struggled to find the right words. "I was wrong about you."

Chris snorted. "Tell me something I don't know," he said sarcastically.

Winter's eyes pinned him as she splayed her hands. "Just shut up and let me do this," she said desperately. When Chris didn't reply, she went on, "When Linda came to me two years ago, I sincerely thought she'd been wronged. She sat in my office and cried nonstop for hours. She said she loved you, that she wanted to work things out."

When Chris snorted again, Winter quickly replied, "You said you'd hear me out."

He nodded and she continued, "She said no matter how much she tried to keep your interest, you turned to other women. After awhile, she simply couldn't take it anymore and told you she wanted out. She said you told her that she could walk away anytime but you'd never give her a penny."

Chris' eyes flew to hers but didn't say a word as Winter continued. "My life as a divorce lawyer has been about helping women walk away from a failed marriage with some respect still intact. I believed everything Linda said and I wanted to help her."

Chris took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "All right," he said. "You wanted to help Linda. I figured that out two years ago. Why bring it up now?"

Winter shook her head sadly. "Because I was wrong," she said. "Because I discovered after the divorce was settled that Linda played me for a fool. When we left the courtroom that last day, I walked into the woman's restroom and found her

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screwing your pool boy. She admitted everything then. Only it was too late. The damage had been done."

Chris' eyes darkened as he set his mug on the counter and approached her. He stopped a few feet away. "Was it too late?" he asked, his nostrils flaring in anger. "Had the damage really been done to the point there was no going back?"

"Y-yes," Winter stammered.

Chris nodded lightly. "So, knowing the truth," he said, "realizing Linda had fleeced me, I expect you felt such tremendous guilt that you refused the generous percentage you earned by representing her."

*Oh shit!* "Well—"

"I expect you fully intended to give the fucking blood money you earned back to me, maybe help me to salvage the company I built from the ground up."

"Well, I guess I can return it to you," she said feebly.

Chris sneered at her. "Get out of here," he said softly, ominously. "Get out of here now before I wring your goddamn neck!"

Tears filled Winter's eyes as she blindly reached for her suitcase and ran to the door. God, why hadn't she thought about the money she'd earned? It had never occurred to her for one moment. *Damn it! How could I have been so stupid?*

Chris Donnelly didn't love her. He could never love her ... not after what she'd done to him. Why had she thought telling him the truth would make a difference?

\* \* \* \*

The Knight Before Chris  
by Peggy Hunter

"Chris! So glad you could make it." Jimmy Knight smiled brightly when he opened the door.

Chris forced a smile as he stepped inside his friend's house. "Happy New Year," Chris said as he handed Jimmy a bottle of champagne.

His wife, Susan, dressed in a sequined blouse and shimmering black skirt, embraced Chris warmly. "I'm so glad you decided to leave that dowdy cabin to share New Year's with us," she said brightly. "Come in and get acquainted with our guests."

Chris' eyes quickly scanned the people crowding the living room. Some faces he knew, others he didn't and the one face he'd hoped to see wasn't there.

He knew he should be relieved. But after having gone five days without seeing Winter, what he felt was disappointment.

As he scanned the crowd a second time, a hand settled on his shoulder. "She's not here."

Chris looked at Jimmy. *Does he know what happened between us?* Before he could utter a word, Jimmy went on, "I don't know what's gotten into her. When she was here on Boxing Day, she announced she's closing her office. She's taken a job with Legal Aid in downtown Toronto. We tried to get her to explain things, but she said she didn't want to talk about it." And then Jimmy's eyes grew cold. "You wouldn't happen to know anything, would you?"

Chris grappled with the information. He shook his head. "She never said a word about it to me."

He wasn't lying. If she had plans to close her office, he'd never given her the opportunity to tell him. He'd still been

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grappling with the fact she'd said she loved him. After that, there was nothing he wanted to hear. When morning came, he was only too glad to personally dig her car out and see that she went on her way.

After the fiasco that was his marriage with Linda, he swore he'd never allow his heart to become entangled with any woman again. Just how the hell had he allowed himself to fall for Winter?

Jimmy's fingers tightened on his shoulder. "I figured as much," he said. "Susan's been saying all along that something happened at the cabin while Winter was with you. Claims Winter came back a changed woman." He winked. "What do women know anyway, right?"

"Did Winter tell you where she'd be tonight?" Chris asked.

Jimmy shook his head. "No, she never said," he replied. "But when she called to wish us a Happy New Year, our call display showed her office number. I suspect she's there packing things up."

Chris slapped Jimmy on the back. "That's all I need to know, buddy," he said as he turned to the door.

Jimmy followed him and retrieved his coat. "There's something else," he said as he pulled a white envelope out of the back pocket of his pants and handed it to Chris. "Winter left this with us when she was here on Boxing Day."

Chris took the envelope from his friend's hand after he zipped up his coat. The moment he walked out the door, he tore it open. He glanced at the slip of paper in his hand and quickly crumpled it up. He pushed it into his pocket as he headed for his car. "You won't get rid of me that easily," he



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growled.

## Chapter 10

Winter picked up the phone on the first ring. "The soon-to-be-former office of Winter Knight," she said. "May I help you?"

"Oh my God," the familiar shrill voice sounded on the other end. "I expected to get your answering service."

Winter's hand tightened around the receiver. "Hello, Linda," she said.

"It's so good to hear your voice," Linda replied. "It's two a.m. in France and Fredrique and I have just come back to the hotel after the most amazing New Year's celebration. I expected to leave a message wishing you good fortune for the coming year. Why on earth are you in the office on New Year's Eve, darling?"

Winter rolled her eyes. "Ah yes, how is your beloved pool boy? Still madly in love with his mama?"

"Don't be rude," Linda said quickly. "He might be half my age but neither of us is looking for happily-ever-after."

"Then I'm sure you won't be disappointed," Winter replied.

"Oh pooh," Linda said sullenly. "You're still mad at me, aren't you?"

"I still have issues with how you played me," Winter said. "Never mind what we did to Chris."

"What we did?" Linda said as she scoffed. "Honey, all I did was tell you a sob story. You were the one who set the wheels in motion. Besides, I haven't heard you complain about the money you made on the deal. Face it, Winter," ice

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oozed with every word she said, "you're more to blame than I am."

"I'd never have helped you if I'd known what a witch you are," Winter said, her blood boiling. "Chris didn't deserve—"

"Oh boo hoo," Linda shot back sarcastically. "Tell me just how sorry you are after you banked all that money. You wouldn't be a divorce lawyer if there wasn't something in it for you, so don't try to convince me otherwise."

Winter was about to reply when she felt firm fingers close over her hand and pry the phone away. She gazed up with shock in her eyes as Chris put the phone to his ear. "Winter might not be able to convince you otherwise," he said, "but I can assure you, she'll never find herself on your level. She's a good, honest, hardworking woman who wants to help people who have been wronged."

Winter blinked in amazement as Chris listened to his ex-wife's reply. "Here's something else you should know," he said. "If I'd known just how good sex was with a woman who actually loved me, I never would have gotten tangled up with you in the first place. So you go on and fuck the living shit out of good ol' Freddie. Check with me a few years down the road and we'll see who's doing better."

Winter watched speechlessly as Chris slammed the phone onto the cradle and ripped the cord out of the wall. Her mouth fell open as he deftly wrapped the cord around the phone and held it against his chest.

"You did plan to pack the phone, too, didn't you?" he asked.

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"Uhm, no," Winter replied. "The phone service was included in the rental fee for the office space."

Chris frowned. "Oh shit," he said as he placed the phone back onto the desk and looked at the fragmented phone cord. "Guess I'll have to make good for that."

Winter nervously rose from behind the desk and placed a few books into a box. "No," she said. "It'll just come out of my security deposit. Not a big deal."

Winter sensed his approach and almost jumped when his voice sounded close to her. "Aren't you wondering why I'm here?" he asked.

She nodded her head slowly as she continued to pack the box.

She blinked when he reached in front of her and displayed a crumpled piece of paper. "Thought I'd return the check you left with Jimmy."

Winter swallowed hard and turned to face him. "Why didn't you just take the check and run?" she asked.

Chris tossed it on the floor. "Because I don't want your money—"

She cut him off. "It's not my money," she said. "It's yours, it's always been yours."

"Shut up for a minute and let me talk," Chris said. "I don't want the money. All I want is you." He shook his head slowly. "I love you too, Winter Knight. I couldn't bring myself to say so at the cabin, but I'm telling you now."

Winter's heart burst with love for him as she gazed at him in total amazement. "Oh!"

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Chris smiled as he took a step closer to her. "I don't know what the future holds for us," he said. "I don't know if we'll love each other for the rest of our lives. But I do know one thing," he said as his arms wrapped around her waist and pulled her to him, "I don't see my future without you in it because I love you, Winter Knight."

Tears sprang to her eyes as she fell into his arms. "I love you, too," she said just before his mouth closed over hers.

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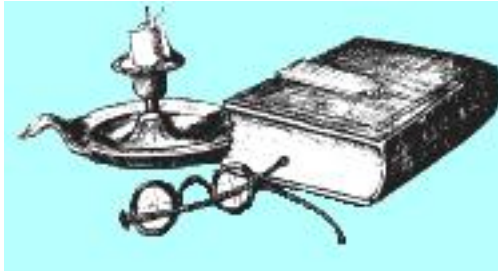
*ABOUT THE AUTHOR*

Peggy is thrilled to have another Torrid release. She lives in Midwestern Ontario with her husband, son and several pets. When she's not writing, you can bet she's chasing after at least one of the living beings in her house.

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