

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace, nearly kissing. The woman has long dark hair and is wearing a dark top. The man is shirtless. They are positioned in front of a fireplace with a bright fire burning inside. Above the fireplace, a Christmas tree is visible, decorated with warm white lights and red bows. The overall atmosphere is cozy and festive.

TIERNEY O'MALLEY

WICKED NIGHT BEFORE  
*Christmas*

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*He tried to make her his..*

Lucas McLeod fell in love with his sister's best friend who enjoys bantering with him. He is fighting the urge, the temptation to cross the fine line between friendship and lovers. But Lucas lost. When he succumbs to passion and makes love with her, he knows she is the one he wants to grow old with. Before he leaves for Florida, he gives her his promise. He will be back.

*She tried to ignore him...*

Cara Saint Regis is devastated when Lucas, her best friend's brother and the man she believes will come back for her, arrives in the cabin with his high school sweetheart instead. Worse, she catches them French kissing. A few days before Christmas, Cara's heartache turns into a blinding jealousy and anger—but deep inside her heart, her love and desire remains strong and true.

*Will love, passion, and the spirit of holidays help them reunite in time to celebrate Christmas?*

Being around Cara is a test. Her nearness inflames his desire. Their closeness reminds him of what he's been missing—her touch, smile, and her kisses. He misses her. Lucas wonders if his burning need to be with her again can wait until Christmas eve to answer the wish she wrote on the paper and hung on the Christmas tree—a wicked night before Christmas.

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# **Wicked Night Before Christmas**

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By

\* \* \* \*

Tierney O'Malley

## **Dedication**

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*For Tom, Francesca, and Genevieve...my inspirations, my bright stars*

## Chapter One

\* \* \* \*

*Oh, yeah. Eat my snow dust!*

For the first time, Cara St. Regis took the lead. She glanced back to check on Amy. Her friend was still a couple yards behind. Feeling victorious, she squared her shoulders and faced the bottom of the hill.

Downhill skiing wasn't her favorite activity. But the rush, challenges, cold air biting her exposed cheeks, concentration and butterflies in her stomach helped her forget Amy's brother, Lucas. He had opted to stay with his ex-high school sweetheart, Rochelle, at the Mongolian Restaurant, who wrapped her arms around him like a barnacle on a wet rock, batted her lashes and pouted her lips. In an annoying tone that sounded like a spoiled annoying brat, Rochelle whined she didn't want her two hundred fifty dollar Ugg Gissella Espresso to get wet. *Most likely they just want to ogle each other, exchange memories and create more to come. Like French kissing in the restaurant. They'd been lip-locked since they had arrived in the morning so what would stop them from doing it in a restaurant.*

Just like Seattle's unpredictable, ever-changing weather, the thought soured her already curdled mood and quickly changed it to anger. Her agitation contrasted that of the serene view of the mountains.

Earlier, Amy whispered that Rochelle and Lucas were only friends now. *Friend. Yeah right. Some friend she is.* She wouldn't French kiss and share saliva with Lucas unless something beyond friendship was going on between them.

*And dratted Lucas obviously enjoyed the kiss.* He just smiled and kept his hold on Rochelle's hips. She bet he had a hard-on for that more than friendly kiss. If they were that noxiously sweet with each other in front of people, she couldn't imagine what they'd been doing while in Florida.

Tiny, painful pricks, like getting stuck in a blackberry bush, jabbed her jealous heart. Chest hurting from the painful scene she had witnessed, Cara planted her pole forcefully into the thick snow then pushed hard. She picked up speed and for a few seconds felt airborne. Powdered snow sprayed and spattered her goggles, obstructing her view. Visibility became low, but she didn't care.

*Stop, damn it!* It was stupid to care about what those two were doing anyway. So what if they were exchanging saliva and bodily functions? Lucas wasn't hers. He was free to do his own bidding, sleep with anyone, French kiss anyone.

She had shared a night with Lucas. That night had been wonderful, but it had been just that. One night together. A result of drinking large cups of Margaritas on her part and single malt Scotch on his. Cara wondered if her inexperience in bed had turned him off. Maybe he liked the kind who knew how to suck tongue and maybe dick, too, like Rochelle.

A gossip magazine had printed a snippet about Rochelle sleeping around to get what she wanted, including her beauty queen crown, and something about diet pills. She could believe the diet pills part. The woman looked like a telephone pole with D cup bra size and hips that reminded her of the popular pop singer and dancer, Beyonce.

Cara never liked the woman not because she could be the human counterpart of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of beauty. It was a female instinct and unspoken hate that the woman had been sending her. They'd met twice, both times she gave her a silent evil message she could only interpret as, *touch Lucas, and I'll kill you, bitch.*

Would Rochelle really kill her if she found out she had touched Lucas? Well, she'd be happy to know touching Lucas had resulted in their friendship going down the drain. Despite his promise that they would talk, she never heard from him again. Lucas must have regretted sleeping with her.

*Uh-huh. They would talk. Bull.* If Amy had not given her updates about Lucas's job with the Drug Enforcement Agency, his recent hookup with Rochelle and that they were coming here together for the holiday, she'd still be waiting for him, for his call. Lucas just went to his assignment in Florida and didn't look back.

Why? Could it be that after their first night, he saw what was in her heart, that she harbored a secret love for him, which scared the bejeezus out of him? Cara wondered if Lucas laughed behind her back for taking her on the floor. No. He wouldn't do that. They'd known each other for over six months. Perhaps not a very long time, but enough to know Lucas would never make fun of anyone. She had fallen for his kind and gentle nature, sense of humor, and dedication to protect not to destroy. Cara sighed. She shouldn't be mad at him because of Rochelle. The two were high school sweethearts where she was just his sister's friend stupid enough to open her legs for him.

It was all her fault. If she didn't cross the fine line that divided friendship and lovers, she wouldn't be in this awkward and unpleasant quandary. Holy Santa, one moment they were friends and then boom! Their friendship was no more because they—for some magical reason—made love.

That night, with their bodies still joined, hearts pounding like drums, he had said they would talk when he returned. She had believed his bullshit and had hung on to his words like some high school girl falling in love for the first time. *Shit, at twenty-five, I'm still gullible.* She had read enough romance books to know that *any* man would say the words, "I'll call you." Or "We need to talk." And even the three powerful words "I love you." Those phrases were just bull men always said to appease the woman after sex. Kind of like a woman faking an orgasm to boost a man's ego.

And Lucas's words, as wonderful a person as he was, were a classic example of sweet talk after sex. No more, no less.



*Gah!* Clamping her jaws together, Cara avoided a small snow hill. Her body tilted to the left the way she did when riding a motorcycle. She was descending faster than she had ever done before. Cold wind bit her cheeks, but the exertion and angry thoughts about her own stupidity and lack of good sense kept her body warm.

She knew Lucas came back to celebrate Christmas here in Whistler with his family and Rochelle, the newly crowned Miss Washington State. So why did she say yes to Amy to come here, too?

Where was her brain and pride? She could have used different alibis—migraine, PMS, bulk orders. She didn't have to come here. *Great Santa, who am I kidding?* The truth of it was—no matter how hard she tried to deny it—she wanted to see Lucas with an intensity that destroyed her thinking brain cells and made her forget how awkward it would be to be near a man who took her virginity while he snuggled with his *friend*. Worse, her room was next to Lucas's. What was she going to do if she heard erotic sounds coming from his room? Listen and enjoy? God, this would be one hell of a Christmas holiday, Cara thought.

Irritated, she initiated a turn to avoid a jump using her pole for balance. *Damn it.* Skiing should keep her mind off Lucas not make her brain cogitate about the what if's and what should have beens.

Amy zoomed past her with a grin on her face. "Hey, ran out of gasoline? Come on little engine, choo-choo!"

*Ah, shit.* No way would she lose this time. She quickly planted her pole into the powdery snow again and let the velocity do its own work. When she spotted a jump ahead of her, she didn't avoid it, she took it.

Amy reached the bottom only a couple minutes after her, laughing with her goggles covered with snow. "You should have seen yourself. One minute you were going down so fast then slowed down. And then before I could blink, you zoomed passed me like a pro. It's as if there is some inner strength in you."

*Inner anger is more like it caused by my foolishness and your brother and his super perfect girlfriend.* Cara made a show of tapping her skis. "Eagerness to kick your butt is my strength."

"Well, it worked. You're really getting good at this. You flew, Cara. I've never seen you ski like that before."

"Like a pro." She removed her goggles, tapped them on her thigh to shake off the snow then tucked them under her armpit. "Yeah, you said that already."

"More than that."

"What?"

"As if you were chasing someone or someone was chasing you. You look pissed, too. I hope not with me."

Oh dear, now her emotions showed on her face, too. She'd better put her act together and pull a happy face later. No way would she let Lucas know she was jealous of his high school sweetheart. Cara couldn't help but wish she were staying in a different cabin instead. Better yet, she shouldn't have come here. She'd rather be alone than share dinner, breakfast and lunch with Lucas. Cara looked at the restaurant where Lucas and Rochelle were probably sipping hot cocoa. Her stomach clenched at the prospect of being in the same room with him.

"Why would I be pissed at you? Besides, I am not pissed. I just didn't want to lose—again."

"You want me to believe that? I think it's either you're scowling because of my numbskull brother or you regretted breaking up with gorgeous Rick?"

Rick. Going out with Rick, the guy she met at one of the Glass Blowing conventions in Oregon, happened because of her rebellious nature. When Amy called and said Lucas hooked up with his high school sweetheart, she felt a jealousy so foreign to her that it dragged her down until she couldn't concentrate on her work anymore. She began to question Lucas's reason for leaving. That perhaps his job wasn't the only motive why he left in a hurry. That he wanted to see Rochelle, to watch her parade herself at a beauty pageant.

For days she moped, worked mindlessly for hours on end, which helped camouflage the pain and feeling that everything was wrong. But all that was temporary. When alone, nauseating despair smothered her. So when Rick called on her cellphone, she thought why suffer when she could even out the game. And so she began dating Rick.

"Rick is okay. Where did you get the idea I'm pissed because of Lucas?"

"Aside from how you keep looking at the restaurant? Well, let's see. You couldn't wait to leave the house when Rochelle and Lucas arrived. Also, every time I try to tell you something about Lucas you frown and turn bright red. And when you think no one's looking, you shoot daggers at my brother with your stormy gray-eyed gaze. Not that I mind you shooting daggers at him. I do that, too, when I'm mad at him."

"I'm not mad at him."

"Oh? You haven't seen each other for a month and today you acted as if you never knew him. He must have done something to upset you. What happened between you two?"

*We shared bodily fluids.* "Nothing. Like you said, I didn't see him for a month. Just lost that friend connection, I guess." Last thing she wanted to do was tell her friend, *Oh, after giving me a ride home, he stayed to check out my special collection of glass vases. We thought about having coffee, but when we looked at each other coffee flew out of our minds. The staring progressed to removing clothes. And then he broke my hymen and gave me the most wonderful night I've ever had.*

"Cara, I'm your friend. You can tell me. Is my brother the reason why you broke up with Rick?"

*And the reason why I dated Rick.* Cara dropped her lashes to hide the truth in her eyes, then took a deep breath and let out in a whoosh. She could tell Amy anything except the truth, but as perceptive as she was...everything she'd tell her would slide off her back like water on a duck's feathers if she thought of them as fabricated. Besides, it might help ease the bitter jealousy that had been weighing her down if she told someone about what and who was bothering her. And Amy would be that someone.

She broke up with Rick because deep inside—stupid as she was—there was still hope she and Lucas would continue what they had started. "Yes."

Amy squealed and clasped her hands together. "Yesss...Cara, you love my brother."

"Don't tell Lucas. Maybe by the end of this week, whatever I feel for him will go away." She would have laughed at Amy's giddy, schoolgirl reaction if she weren't feeling like shit. "Shut up. Please Amy, don't tell him. I won't be comfortable around him anymore if he finds out." She was already so uncomfortable around him that her stomach hurt.

"I won't tell him. Promise." Amy made a cross sign on her chest.

"Thanks. He's still my friend and...you know. He might not enjoy his holiday vacation if...I mean—"

"I know what you mean. Man, this should be a happy moment. We should be sipping champagne not standing here with your gloomy face as if your pet rock died."

"I don't have a pet rock. And rocks don't die."

"I'm aware, silly. Just trying to make a jokey here to lighten up your mood. Did I tell you about the insane dream I had?"

"What dream?"

"That you and Lucas ended up together, got married, had children. I became an auntie to five kids. It was a nice dream. Wouldn't it be nice if my dream came true? We could all come here for the holidays."

"You will still become an auntie. Although, I doubt I'll be responsible for making you one."

"Since we've met six months ago, I thought you should be a permanent part of my family."

"Don't know why," she remarked, glad at how nonchalant she sounded, although her heart fluttered at the thought of becoming a McLeod.

"Come on, silly. You're the best friend and sister I never had. When Lucas started asking about you, I thought—*Yes! It's going to happen.* He's really sweet and teases you all the time. Sparks flew whenever you two were together. Even when you stood apart in the same room. I'm positive he has the hots for you."

*Wrong. He was hot only when I opened my legs to him. Damn margaritas.* "No. He has the hots for Rochelle."

"I doubt it. Rochelle's just an old friend now. They were high school sweethearts, but Lucas grew up and moved on."

"He could have fooled me."

"Me, too." Amy poked the snow with her pole. "Before Lucas left for Florida, he had been following the news about the Miss Washington pageant, which was normal. When Rochelle won the title, went to Florida to compete for Miss USA, which we both know she sucked in, and didn't get any of the consolation titles, Lucas went there, too. To work on a case, of course. But with him showing up here with Rochelle...I don't know."

*No wonder he didn't call while he was there.* "Well, it's obvious isn't it? Told you. He does not have the hots for me, but for Rochelle. Just watch the two. From a distance, I could almost feel their body heat. Hot enough to melt the snow."

"I know what you mean. Saw the French kissing this morning. Never thought bacon would taste so nasty after spending time in your stomach."

Amy wrapped her fingers around her neck and made a gagging sound. Cara shared a smile that she barely felt. "You shouldn't have looked."

"I know. What can I say, seeing them kiss was like witnessing a bad car wreck. Hard to ignore. You looked."

"Touche."

"Come on, Cara. Lucas is only giving Rochelle the attention because she always asks for it. She's been that way for as long as I've known her. And I believe she still wants my brother."

"And you don't think Lucas feels the same?"

"I can't imagine it."

"Because you want me to be the auntie for your kids. Amy, when Rochelle called to tell you that she and Lucas were together in Florida, she was telling you that scoop. They're back together. And here they are, together to celebrate Christmas with you and your parents."

"But I know Lucas was over Rochelle I should ask him."

"Give it up, girl. Isn't it obvious something is going on between them? As far as I can tell, they are reuniting."

"Thus the reason for your scowling."

Cara put the goggles around her head. "Yes." She adjusted the strap before lowering them to shield her eyes. Her eyes itched from her contact lens. She hated the little silicones, but wearing glasses and goggles at the same time, no matter how much she wanted to, was idiotic.

"For a smart DEA Agent, who has led big drug busts in the country, my brother is one dumb idiot. Sorry, Cara."

"What for? Don't worry, Amy. Before this whole celebration is over, I'll be in love with someone else or maybe with Rick. In fact, I'm already thinking about talking to him again."

"Rick is one hot and delicious guy."

"Yup." Cara made a show of checking her skis. She was done talking about Lucas. For now. "Okay, I'll go up again. Are you still good to go?"

"No. My legs feel like over cooked noodles. Are you sure you want to have another run?"

"Yeah. I still have half an hour left before they shut off the lift."

"Alrighty. I'll go back to the restaurant. If Lucas and Rochelle want to go back to the lodge, I'll ride with them. The car key is in the locker. Be safe. Don't overdo it, Cara. You're still a duckling learning how to walk."

Cara gave Amy a raspberry. "Didn't I just beat you?"

"One out of three runs? You haven't beaten me, girl. Hey, don't tire yourself. Remember we're going to be at the Christmas Wish Tree Fund Raiser tonight."

"I won't forget."

"Okay, go."

"Later." Cara skied her way back to the lift that shone bright from hundreds of tiny Christmas lights. As the familiar notes of *Baby It's Cold Outside* echoed in the air, she trudged on the gradual hill smiling at the skiers obviously eager to beat her to the lift. She tried to sing along, summoning the feeling one ought to feel during the holidays—happiness. Instead, the lyrics brought the memories of the night she had shared with Lucas.

He was supposed to have given her a ride home before going to the airport to catch his plane, but another kind of ride had happened—a ride to ecstasy and fulfillment, desire and blinding lust. A month had passed and yet she could still picture Lucas naked in front of her, fully aroused, with

heavy lidded, passion clouded eyes. While she had stood in the middle of her room naked and shaking from anticipation, Lucas had come to her, kissed her, ran his fingers up and down her arms. He had chuckled as her skin puckered from his touch. His lips had lingered on her cheek before moving closer to her own. It had been a slow kiss, but hot enough to melt her bones.

Lucas had kissed her before. But that moment was different. Having seen the scorching look Lucas gave her, she knew a kiss wouldn't be enough. She had dreamed about being touched by him, kissed by him, and taken by him, but not how it would happen. After all, she was a virgin.

When Lucas's kiss had turned deeper, she clung to him, pressing her body against his. He had felt hot and hard all over. Lucas had wrapped his arms around her sealing the gap between them. His cock had pressed just below her bellybutton. Hard and pulsing.

The tip of his tongue had touched the sensitive skin behind her ear before he kissed her way down her throat and cleavage. Hot searching hands had roamed around her body until he finally cupped her breast. Using his thumb, he had rotated her nipple and whispered, "Cara, I've wanted to do this for a long time. You invaded my dreams every night."

"I didn't know," she had replied huskily.

"You have no idea how your gray eyes, lips, dark hair, breasts and long legs drive me crazy every time I see you. Whenever you're near, I can't concentrate, can't think. All I see is you, hear your voice, smell your scent. Everything else dissolves to nothingness leaving only you. You can drive any man crazy." He had kissed the tops of her breasts. "You're beautiful. So smooth."

"I didn't know you see me as beautiful. I'm not a beauty queen," she had moaned as he took turns sucking each of her nipples. Her past boyfriends had made it to second base, cupped her breasts and pinched her nipples, and touched her intimately. But not like this. Cara had looked down and watched his mouth close around her aching breasts. The image of her nipples moving inside his mouth, glistening from his saliva had been so erotic it had sent heat spiraling down to her pussy. She throbbed. Cupping his face, she urged him to take more of her flesh.

"I'll show you how beautiful you are, Cara. Starting now." Using both hands, he had lifted her breasts higher before giving each one a good suck. "Yes, I love your breasts. So perfect. I could do this all night."

Cara couldn't stop watching him take turns trapping her hard and achy nipples between his lips. Never had she seen anything so erotic. She felt transported on soft blossoms of clouds. His hot mouth and caressing hands had robbed her of anything sensible to say. Her thoughts had spun into oblivion. She could not think but only feel. When Lucas's hand had proceeded to go lower to dip his fingers in to touch her pussy, her body had shivered. "Lucas, ohh..."

"Yes, babe. Like that, huh? How about this?"

His hand had gone around her front and touched her clit. Slowly, he ran his fingers up and down her seams until she felt so wet. Cara had wanted to stop his invasion. But her body yearned for

something different. She had moved her hips against his prying fingers. "It feels so good. Don't stop."

"I won't. I told you, I'd show you how beautiful you are. Wrap your leg around me."

Doing what he had said would leave her open. Embarrassment and excitement tangled together, but her state of emotional arousal had won. "Like this."

"That's it."

Cara had whimpered as Lucas's middle finger dipped inside her pussy. She'd touched herself there many times and had let her previous boyfriends finger fuck her, but they were never this good. With Lucas taking his time rotating and sliding while his mouth clamped hard on her nipple, the sensation felt entirely different. His touch had somehow made her feel special as if he adored her like a goddess, not just a warm body.

Lucas's finger went in a little further, quickly raising her temperature.

"You're so wet, baby. I want to slide in and out of you now, but I want you to come first. Sit on me."

"What?"

"I want you to sit."

"I don't think..."

Before she could say anymore, Lucas had lowered himself to the carpeted floor and reclined on his back. She looked at his long and lithe body, strong chest and flat stomach, muscled thighs and pulsing cock. "Good god." When it came to a man's cock, she was as green as anyone would have thought about a virgin. But having seen him throb with a clear liquid emerging from his tip was too much to take in.

"Come here. Sit astride me," he said while his gaze raked boldly over her.

With a body so hot and screaming for more of his caresses, Cara had stepped over him. Lucas groaned and reached his hand to touch her wet pussy. When she slowly lowered herself, Lucas grabbed her hips gently and pulled her up and up until she practically sat on his chest. "Lucas, what are you doing?"

"I want you to sit on me, like this," he had placed his hands on her bottom and moved her higher until her pussy was directed above his mouth.

"This is—"

"Shhh, love. It's okay." Lucas had smiled at her before he lowered her to his mouth and started running his tongue along her seams. She'd dreamt about making love to him, but nothing had compared to this. The position was simply... wickedly erotic. It had given her the total control of how and where she wanted to be licked and sucked.

As soon as Lucas had flattened his tongue on her clit to tease and please, passion took over her senses, wiping away embarrassment and inhibitions. Cara had moved her hips as she aimed her pussy where she wanted his tongue to run. When she rotated her hips and centered the tip of his tongue on her clitoris, Lucas had supplied what her body wanted—a good sucking.

"Ohh...Lucas, I never...."

Lucas had moaned and kept his mouth on her clit. His one big hand cupped and teased her breasts. Cara had known how illicit the action was but she was having the best time of her life and couldn't stop. She had continued moving her ass until she felt the beginning of her orgasm. "More, Lucas. I'm coming, yes..." She had felt so open, exposed and horny shame had no room in her mind.

"Damn, you're so wet. I could do this all night long." Lucas had spread her labia and speared her with his tongue before feasting on her like a man deprived of sweet meats. His mouth was hot against her entry as he continued to taste her.

Cara's chest thrust forward when she aimed the part of her that she knew would help her reach the highest peak. "Please...right there."

"Ready to come, baby?"

"Yes. Oh yes."

"Spread your pussy for me. Oh, fuck. Yes. You're dripping in my mouth." Lucas sucked her open cunt.

"Ohh, I want to come."

"You will, love." With the flats of his tongue, he had licked her good. "Taste so good."

"Lucas, now."

Finally, he took pity on her. Lucas had squeezed her breast and clamped his clit between his teeth for a great suckling that had her screaming. The dual assault on her body opened the gates of pleasure that had led her to the highest peak. Cara had screamed Lucas's name. The intensity of her orgasm had her shaking. She felt like laughing and crying at the same time. Still reeling from her release, Lucas helped her scoot down until his cock touched her ass. "Now what?"



"Now it's my turn." Lucas had pulled her down on top of him and rolled. Cara found herself pinned beneath him. Settled in between her legs with the length of his cock pressed on her pussy, he said, "You're mine now."

Cara had held her breath and waited as Lucas rubbed the tip of his penis up and down her pussy a couple times. He teased her entry with the tip of his wet cock before slowly sliding inside her passage. Lucas was long and thick that she had felt her vagina stretch. When he had reached her barrier, her pleasure was dampened with pressure and a slight hint of pain. And the pressure she knew was due to her intact hymen.

"Baby, hang on. I'll fuck you fast and hard. Damn, you're so tight."

"Lucas," she had whispered and dug her fingers on his shoulders

Lucas thrust his hips. He stopped then pressed deeper. "Cara, are you...you're a virgin?"

"Yes, but—"

"Fuckin' eh! Why didn't you tell me? I could have hurt you. Are you okay?"

"Yes, but I won't be okay if you stop."

"Are you sure? It's not too late."

"I'm sure."

"Really?"

"Yes, I want this. I want you."

Lucas had kissed her with his tongue thrust inside her mouth sharing the scent and taste he got from her. "Cara, baby. I want this, too. Fuck, you have no idea. But you might—"

"Please, Lucas."

"I need to protect you."

"Not now. I'll die if you stop. Now, Lucas."

"Cara, you might regret—"

"Please."

"Hang on to my shoulders. That's it. You're so ready you might not feel the pain. If you do just let—"

"Quit talking. Just do it, Lucas."

And then he had thrust in one swift move. Lust and the need to come again quickly replaced her tiny feeling of discomfort. Lucas had covered her mouth with his, swallowing her cries of pleasure as he pumped inside her until his movement turned almost unrestrained. "Lift your ass. Yes...Cara, Caraaa..." he had groaned and bit her neck lightly before kissing the same spot.

Lucas had stayed the whole night. They made love five times in the course of eight hours. Lucas had used the pack of condoms he stashed in his duffel bag except for the first time. Cara woke up the next morning with Lucas's lips on her breasts, nibbling her skin. While kissing her awake, he had explained that he would be busy for the next month because of the new case he had to take in Florida. Just wait for him, he had told her. When he returned, they would talk.

A skier whizzed past, apologized for spraying her with pristine white snow, bringing her back to where she was—a cold mountain and not Lucas's hot arms. *He came back alright—with Rochelle.*

Cara got in line. Since only a few skiers were left, it didn't take long before it was her turn to get in a chair.

Maybe if she tired herself, she could tell Amy's mom and dad when she returned from the slopes that she needed rest and wouldn't be able to join them for dinner or family night. She would wait in her room until it was time for her and Amy to leave for a fun night at Whistler Hall. Sounds like a good plan, she thought. But what about the rest of the week? She couldn't possibly ski every single day. She'd be in a coma from exhaustion before the week was over. Besides, hiding was for cowards. And she was everything but that.

She could handle this. She could face the man who showed her how spectacular sex could be and insulted her after by bringing his ex-girlfriend home instead of following up on his promise of talk.

*Yeah, I'm not a baby and not a coward.* She could even try the Devil's Jump.

On her way up to the Jersey Cream Bowl, an easy run for a beginner like her, she forced a smile and waved at the tourists riding the gondolas. Wintertime in Whistler was always the heaven for skiers due to its combined extensive terrain and good snow. Tourists who didn't care about skiing came here to walk around the village to shop, enjoy the highly rated nightlife, or simply enjoy the view.

Cara scanned the majestic beauty surrounding her, savoring the chance of being one with nature. For skiing enthusiasts, Whistler Blackcomb Resort was a paradise. Different slopes catered for every level of skier and snowboarder. Every type of terrain could be accessed by lift system or snowmobiles and yet the slopes remained uncrowded allowing sufficient areas for lovers, newlyweds, or any couples. Which, she supposed, made this place romantic. Closing her eyes, she honed her senses on the sensuous sound of skis smoothing the angel-wing white snow and the intoxicating fragrance of trees. This place was made for lovers.

The sound of people laughing made her open her eyes. She loved being here, to ski, although she wasn't a great skier, drink hot cocoa and watch people from all over the world mix together, and basked in all of God's wonderful creation. This was her first time celebrating the holidays with Amy's family, the McLeod's. And it was possible that this could be her last.

From the ski chain, Cara looked down at a couple skiing together. Honeymooners, she thought. The way the two skied with a speed of a turtle, stopping to exchange kisses, they wouldn't reach the bottom of the mountain until midnight. She bet they wouldn't mind.

She could have been doing the same if she was still with Rick. Their three-week relationship had progressed smoothly, but when she felt Rick was beginning to feel sexual and looked forward to the more physical part of the relationship, she chickened out and broke up with him. She couldn't imagine getting in bed with him. Continuing with the relationship wasn't fair for him anyway. He loved her, he said so many times, but she pined for another man—Lucas McLeod.

The lift slowed then stopped. Elf Steve, the ski lift usher, with a big smile and sun burned cheeks and nose, helped her by stopping her chair. "Jersey Cream Bowl, miss."

"Thanks. Is the Devil's Jump still open?"

"Yeah. You have to get off at the third stop. Wanna do it?"

Why not try it? Devil's Jump required concentration and attention. It would be a perfect way for her to forget about Lucas and his tongue sticking friend. "Yup."

"Okay. Just follow the sign to the Devil. This'll be the last run so if you want to take it, your last chance for today. The lift will stop in a few minutes."

"Thanks. I will take the Devil. I'll probably see you again tomorrow."

She'd never been this high up. Cara felt like flying. The air was thinner and colder, but with the sun beating down on her, it evened out the temperature. She felt good actually.

Seeing she was about to get off the lift, Cara readied her poles.

She planted her pole and skied, following the arrows pointing toward the Devil's Jump. She could do it. How was she going to improve if she kept on taking the bunny hills? She passed the sign, *Red Flag- Expert Level*.

Facing down the slope, she finally realized why the run was named after a devil. And seeing how steeped it was, she'd more likely face the devil before she reached the bottom. From miles down, she could see different jumps and sharp turns. Filling her lungs with air, she kept her courage from turning into stardust. "Okie dokie, Cara. This is it." All she had to do was control her speed and she'd make it downhill still standing.

She fixed her goggles, making sure they were tight enough to keep the snow from getting inside, adjusted her gloves and hung on to her poles with a tight grip. With her heart thumping against her chest, she pushed using her pole.

As soon as she went down, she picked up speed. Cara tucked her poles and bent forward to keep her balance. The run was somewhat easy until she reached the rough rugged terrain. She managed to make a sharp turn to avoid a tree, but ended up inside the half pipe snowboarders would most likely take. Cara breathed in and out. The pipe posed no difficulty at all as long as she stayed off the sides. But her heart sank when she saw what was ahead of her—two jumps. The one on the left looked higher than the one on the right leaving a narrow room for her to go through in the middle. She concentrated and kept her eye on the left jump. But the closer she had gotten to it, the quicker her courage depleted. And at the last moment, she decided to take the narrow passage instead. She made a turn, but the tip of her left ski caught the side of the jump.

The scenery blurred and the world went into slow motion. Blue skies and snow covered trees turned upside down and right side up. Powdered snow flew around her. She tumbled and couldn't stop. After what seemed to be forever, finally, she landed flat on her back.

For a minute, Cara kept her eyes closed. She felt dizzy. Bile rose from her throat. Breathing hard through her mouth, she tried to calm herself. She didn't know where she had landed and was afraid to find out. *Crap! What a hell of a tumble.* She blinked and opened her eyes. Through her partly covered goggles, she stared at the sky. Cara didn't move. She waited for the pain to come. Nothing. She could move her feet. Her left foot was a bit sore, but not broken. Her lower back throbbed from landing hard on the snow, which later tonight would probably give her hell for being stupid. But other than that, she was whole and alive.

*Thank god. Imagine celebrating Christmas with a broken heart and limb.* Rochelle would probably laugh at her and Lucas would look at her with pity in his eyes. Her goggles fogged up as warm tears quickly blurred her eyes. She should just go home or somewhere. Just get away from here. Running away wasn't always a sign of cowardice, but of maturity or being smart. Why punish herself by sticking around the man she loved who obviously had no feelings for her? Why didn't she just accept her parents' offer to go with them in Italy?

Sadness overwhelmed her. Suddenly she felt so tired and achy. Her cell phone rang, but she ignored it. All she wanted to do was lay there and watch the clouds go by, feel the soft breeze touch her cheeks and let the lowering afternoon sun bake her cold miserable self.

And so she did.

\* \* \* \*

Why did Cara have to go up again, alone? Lucas asked himself. She wasn't an expert skier. The woman was as graceful as an elephant in her own glass store. It amazed him how she could make and sell hand blown glass vases when she broke more than two every day.

When he saw his sister come into the restaurant without Cara, he wasn't surprised to hear Cara decided to go home alone than ride with them. Cara had been ignoring him, giving him cold shoulders since he had arrived. The way she'd been acting it was as if he did something to upset her. It was she who pissed him off.

The same day he had left for Florida, he had started looking forward to seeing her again and planned what they would do together. But three weeks after he'd been gone, he had heard she started going out with a man, which meant she wasn't as affected as he was by what had happened between them. And that seriously stung his ego, his freaking heart. Hadn't she understood when he had said wait for him?

He wondered if she had woken up and realized she had made a mistake giving her virginity to him. Was he a lousy lover? He didn't think so. Cara had fallen apart in his arms when she climaxed. He knew it. She had matched him thrust for thrust, moaned lustily while her walls throbbed around him. She had screamed his name before sighing in exhaustion with passion, burning in her eyes and a smile of satisfaction written all over her face. That night had been magical and Cara had been the beautiful fairy floating in the bliss of pleasure. So what happened? Had she not wanted to be a virgin anymore and he just happened to be available to take it? That was so fucking bad. Because he had fallen for her—hard.

He'd met Cara when he went to her shop to pick up Amy's purchases—three multicolored, handmade, state-of-the-art vases designed with intricate patterns. He had to stare at them trying to figure out how they were made. Their meeting had been destined, he believed. He had been on his way to his office in Portland when Amy had called and asked him a favor. If he stopped by Cara's shop in Seattle, she promised that she'd paint the famous Cannon Beach Rock for him as a Christmas present.

The moment he had walked in Cara's store and spotted her behind the counter, he was glad he let his sister bribe him. Cara was busy examining a glass, wearing an old apron over a green shirt that had hugged her lush breasts like a tight skin. She had pinned up her hair, but strands had already escaped and curled around her face. He had watched her torture her lips for a while, enjoying the way she angled her head from left to the right with her light brown eyebrows slanted in a frown as she examined the vase she held. As soon as she looked up and their eyes met, he knew infatuation had struck him. And when she smiled his body had responded quickly the way he would when touched by a woman. Right that moment, he had wanted to run his hands on her smooth hair, to taste her wet lips with his own, and search her secret curves.

Cara and Amy, both artists in their own way, had become fast friends and he had been a friend and brother they teased. His infatuation with Cara had quickly turned into an obsession. He had dreamed about her, had thought about her constantly, and had come up with all kinds of excuses so he could see her. Something about her ability to compose herself as an intelligent, professional, and confident woman when around other people and be as playful as a girl with him and Amy had fascinated him. Cara was not perfect by any means. She could hold her glass with gentleness, but break one because she was clumsy. Her imperfections though were what made her more enchanting.

After their initial meeting, he would stop by at her store to browse or buy the vases he had seen the previous days although he was running out of room in his condo. Or he would invite her to go out for lunch or dinner, which she never said no to.

Those times, when he had made her laugh, when they had shared ice cream and had fought for the last slice of brownie, embedded in his heart. He never reveled on memories of other girlfriends the way he did with Cara. The woman had warmed his blood like fire on a wintry night.

It was their first kiss that had sealed his heart, trapping his emotions, the need to have Cara not just a friend but as lover. His fantasy of having her happened a month ago. He had opened his heart and made love with her for the first time. The need to stay beside her, watch her sleep, feel her heart beat against him and hold her had been overwhelming. But he had to leave that morning. With his body, heart and soul screaming that he stay, he had told her that they would talk when he returned.

With the hard case he'd been working on as an undercover agent, one that had forced him to stop thinking about Cara, he hadn't had a chance to call her. With his job, he didn't have any time to reminisce, to dream of her. But he had seen her face when death had come close to him during one of the raids. Cara had given him the strength to stay alive. It was she who had made him fire his gun to save his own life. The month he hadn't seen her made him realize what he felt for her was akin to love.

And this woman he loved had been ignoring him, had dated a different man and had decided to ski alone. He loved his job and not once had he regretted becoming a DEA agent. But Cara had tapped his cement-strong dedication, questioned that maybe he should have said no to going to Florida and stayed with her instead. They would have been having fun right now. Instead he worried something bad happened to her.

Good thing Amy was quick to realize why he had to find Cara and agreed to give Rochelle a ride back to the cabin. He could follow Cara and drag her beautiful butt back where she should be. He didn't give a reindeer's crap whether Rochelle complained or not about him leaving her alone. He would follow Cara to hell and back if he had to.

Whistler Mountain, like any other mountain, had treacherous, challenging slopes. Even the easy ones were hard on beginners like Cara.

Lucas lowered his goggles and positioned himself for the descent. Devil's jump was one of the three difficult runs in Whistler. He looked down at the steep slope. Why would Cara take this run? *Damn that woman!* When he found her he'd wring her lovely neck and shut her up with a kiss.

He dialed Cara's cell the second time. After the third ring, his call transferred to an automated machine—again. Where the heck was she? Taking her time going down the slope or was she stuck somewhere? He hoped it was the first. It had been forty-five minutes since the lift stopped

taking skiers up the mountain. The usher in an elf suit told him Cara went down minutes before he closed the lift, which meant she must be somewhere on the slope.

He hoped Steve the elf would follow his direction. Wait ten minutes. If Cara's face didn't show up, then call for help.

Devil's Jump. What the hell was she thinking? This was her first time skiing. Why try the hardest route? Lucas planted his poles and pushed hard.

## Chapter Two

\* \* \* \*

The cold snow penetrated her ski suit. If she didn't get up soon, she'd probably greet the New Year with pneumonia. She didn't want that. She was here to celebrate Christmas and to have fun, not get beaten down by jealousy.

It took a moment to gather her strength to get up. When she did, her foot and back screamed *don't move*. She ignored the pain. Pain was for ninnies and she wasn't one. She dropped a vase on her foot one time and didn't cry, although her toenail died instantly. A bully in her sixth grade class named Norma Jean punched her on the forehead because she refused to give up her role as Rudolph in the school's Christmas show. She didn't cry, but punched Norma in the gut, which ended her reign as the school bully. She'd been a fighter. Why stop now? If Lucas wanted to flaunt his girlfriend in front of her, she could do that, too. She'd call Rick to join her here. How about that?

She traced back the path to find her missing poles. She couldn't believe how far she'd tumbled. Luckily, she didn't land on the edge of the run where the soft part of the snow could bury her alive. How far was she from here to the bottom of the hill? *What if I go back up?* She looked at the lift. It had been shut off. The only way home was by skiing down Devil's Jump.

"I could walk down."

The air had turned colder and the horizon bright orange, painting the skyline with magnificent colors of yellow, purple, orange and gray. The mixture of colors gave the view a very somber look. She wondered if Lucas and Rochelle were looking at the setting sun, too.

*Ah! Forget him.* Despite the soreness in her lower back, she walked uphill carrying her skis. Her legs burned from too much exertion, but she forced herself to move. She wouldn't leave the slope until she found her poles. Lucas gave them to her. No, Lucas wasn't the reason why she wanted to find the poles, she told herself. Those poles were expensive.

Last summer, she, Amy and Lucas had come here, enjoyed the Alpine walks, rode All Terrain Vehicles, visited deep old growth coastal hemlock-cedar forests and active bear dens that had her gripping Lucas arm afraid a mama bear would pounce on them. It had been a hot summer. Whistler looked totally different then. Instead of skis, motorbikes and ATV's were everywhere. The whole village had been busy with tourists, mountain bikers, and locals. She remembered stopping at the ski shop and looking around. She had told Amy and Lucas that she didn't know how to ski and would love to try it. Lucas nodded, went inside the store and bought a pair of skis. On their way back to the cabin, he handed her the wrapped skis and had said "for you."

That night, while sitting on the floor and leaning against the couch, Lucas had laid his head on her lap and closed his eyes. He looked so relaxed with his ankles crossed and hands on his chest. Amy who had been sipping her cocoa complained that she was tired from their long walks and had to go to bed. She left her and Lucas in the candle lit living room



Cara had watched him. With his eyes closed, she was able to take her fill. He had looked so devilishly handsome with his long and layered dark brown hair, its tips curling and pointing in every direction. His nose had a slight bump on the bridge but nevertheless straight. She had known he possessed dark blue eyes with a darker rim on the outside. She'd looked at him more than enough to know that. And his lips...she would have given anything to kiss those wide full lips.

She had thought about touching him, but Lucas opened his eyes. For a moment, they had looked at each other before he lifted one hand to play with her shoulder length hair.

"You have beautiful hair. Straight and feels like silk."

"Pantene conditioner is my secret. Don't tell anyone."

Lucas had smiled, tickling her cheek and nose with the tips of her hair. "Glad you're here. Did you leave anyone in Oregon crying because you're spending a few weeks of summer with us?"

Cara had laughed softly. She played with his hair, combing it back with her fingers. "You know I don't have a boyfriend. If I do, I'll spend my waking hours with him and not here. And I wouldn't share lunch and dinner with you on a regular basis."

"You'd do that? Spend your waking hours with your boyfriend?"

"Of course. Wouldn't you?"

"Uhm, baby, I don't have a boyfriend."

"You know what I mean, silly. If you love someone, you'd want to have that someone within your reach."

"But wouldn't you tire of each other's company?"

"Not if I give my heart and soul to him. I would think. How about you? Left a trail of broken hearts?"

"Of course. A lot of them are crying right now so you're lucky to be here with me."

"Ha! I don't know if getting beat in card games and getting only half of a brownie because you and Amy gobbled it while it's still hot from the oven is considered lucky."

"You don't need brownies. Bad for you." He had taken her hand, placed it on his chest and laced their fingers together. "Stick to the strawberries and green apples."

"You mean the apple peel and the green part of the strawberries. Last time I looked, the strainer was full of them." She had shivered when Lucas laughed and bit the plump part of her palm.

"I'm sorry, babe. Are we starving you here? Don't worry we'll go shopping tomorrow."

"I'll hide the fruits in my room."

"I don't think that would be a good idea. I love fruits, Cara." He had kissed her fingers before rolling on his side with his face buried on her belly.

The position had shocked Cara. She'd never been that intimate with a man before. She could not move. When Lucas had wrapped an arm around her lower back, she closed her eyes and hoped it would last.

It didn't. Lucas sat up quickly and had looked at her as if his eyes were kissing her. He had brushed his lips across her forehead. "You're a temptation. An angel on earth meant to torture men." He cupped her chin and moved his mouth over hers.

The kiss had been gentle, sweet, and as light as autumn breeze. And yet it had sent heat spiraling down the pit of her stomach. He had tantalized her with persuasion to return his kisses. She may have been inexperienced in bed, but not in kissing. When his tongue had sought entry, she opened for him. His mouth was hot and turned demanding. Together their tongues danced and mated. Cara's blood pounded in her brain, pumped her heart, and had made her woozy. Many times, she had floated in her dream with Lucas kissing her. It was good, but not like this. This time, Lucas had taken her to the bed of heaven. When his hand had touched her shoulder, her heart beat wildly. It had been the only audible sound around her.

Lucas's hands had roamed around her body, seeking her breasts, caressing the mound and teasing her nipples. "Cara, Cara, if we don't stop now, I'll take you here on the floor. I don't care if Mom and Dad come down and see us. But I don't think you'll like that."

She had thought about telling him she didn't care. But what would that admission make her? "No, I won't like that."

"Look at me, Cara."

"Next time we do this, I won't stop."

A month ago, he had proved his word. Cara shook her head. She couldn't believe the things she'd done that night. Sitting on him and moving against his body wantonly. Now, look what happened. She'd been suffering emotionally since then.

Cara sighed with resignation. Who was she kidding? She wanted her poles because of Lucas. She was on the damn devil slope because of him. She was miserable because of him. God, she loved Lucas with all of her freezing heart.

The sound of Christmas music drifted in the air making her feel more pathetic than ever.

A black handle sticking out from the ice took her attention away from the pain in her chest. It was her pole. Where could the other one be?

She looked up the hill, hoping to spot the other one. That was when she saw a skier. So she wasn't alone then. *Good.* Maybe the skier could join her. The skier kicked the powdered snow. *Maybe not.*

A pro, she thought. Judging the way he moved, the skier was a man. And whoever he was, he was in a mighty hurry. Powdered snow sprayed where his skis touched. When he took the jump and landed gracefully on his feet, Cara knew he didn't pick this run on a whim. His skill matched the Devil's level of difficulty. He was an expert skier. Unlike her. She should have stayed on the bunny hill.

Cara frowned. The closer the skier got, the faster her heart beat. Finally Cara's heart made a flip. *Holy Santa.* It was him. The very person that drove her to take the stupid slope.

Lucas.

*But what the heck is he doing here?*

As soon as he stopped in front of her, Lucas removed his goggles and threw them on the snow. He removed his skis in a matter of seconds and walked toward her as if he walked on pavement even when his boots disappeared beneath the snow. He stood in front of her, his eyes devoid of mischief, laughter or admiration. His jaw muscles twitched and he breathed through his clenched teeth. Cara had never seen him look at her that way. He looked so angry she would have taken a step back if her foot wasn't sore. And then she noticed something. Something that flickered in his eyes she couldn't discern.

"Are you okay?" he ground out the word between his teeth as he looked at her head down to her buried boots.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Cara, don't sass me. Why are you carrying your skis going back up hill?"

"Because I don't want to leave them."

"Leave them where you landed?"

Cara didn't answer. He didn't have to know exactly what happened. "I lost my poles. I found this one, but I'm still looking for the other one. Why are you here? Aren't you supposed to be—the lifts been shut off. Can ski anytime you want?"

"No. I'm here to find you." Lucas cupped her face.

Cara looked away when her nose began to sting. For the love of her, she couldn't understand why his words made her want to cry. "I'm not lost."

"But you lost your pole and your hair is wet, which tells me you were covered with snow. Meaning you lost control and went down."

"So? I manage to stand up again."

"You could have hurt yourself, babe."

"I'm okay, so you can go now. I need to find my pole." Cara walked around him, but Lucas grabbed her hand.

"I'm not leaving you here. Forget about the pole. You need to go home and rest. You've been skiing all day."

"No. I'm not leaving here without my pole." Her voice rose to a high pitch. She was acting like a child. She knew it, but she could care less.

"Cara, what the hell is wrong with you? You've been—"

"I want my damn pole! What is so hard to understand about that? If you don't want to help me find it, then leave."

"Cara you don't have to yell."

"I am not yelling. Just talking a bit louder, but not yelling."

"You're mad at me."

"What made you think that?" Cara snapped. She would have stomped her feet, too, if they weren't stuck in the snow.

"Since I arrived here, you've been looking at me as if I just killed your cat. And you look ready to sock my gut."

"I would never hurt you." Her reply came out too quick for her taste.

The wind blew, reminding Cara of her wet hair and exposed hand. She blew on her fingers but failed to warm them up.

"Where's your glove?"

"Don't know. I took it off to fix my hair."

"Here. Wear this." Lucas pulled his glove off and offered it to her.

Cara looked at it. She wanted it, but she didn't want his pity. "No, thanks. I'll just find—"

"Take the god damn glove. Want me to put it on you?"

"No. Such a crab." She took the glove and shoved her hand inside. It was warm and big, and lordy, it felt good.

The sound of the snowmobile took her mind off the towering man in front of her. Cara was glad. She needed to control her emotions. Being alone with Lucas again after two long months weakened her armor. Her anger suddenly turned into wanting to wrap her arms around him, feel his body against hers. But with other people around, it would give her time to compose and raise her armor up again.

One ski mobile with tracks at the rear and steered by skis at the front and two red snowmobiles with a white cross on the gas tank side pulled up. Ah, the emergency guys patrolling the area looking for knuckleheads like her, she thought. Cara recognized the usher. He was looking at her with obvious signs of worry on his face.

"Sir, is she okay? Do we need to make an emergency call?" The man wearing a red jacket with white cross on the chest asked. A voice on his radio came on. The man pulled it and talked on the speaker. "She's found and seems to be okay, over."

"Are you hurt anywhere, Cara?"

"Did you call 911 on me?"

"Are you hurt?" Lucas repeated.

"No. I'm fine. Why did you have to call them?"

Lucas ignored her and turned his attention to one of the medics. "Give her a ride."

"Yes, sir. Ma'am, are you ready?"

Cara glared at Lucas, ignoring the medic. "This is not necessary you know."

"Don't make me carry you in front of them. I doubt you'll appreciate it."

"Bully." She crinkled her nose and took a step toward the snowmobile. Shooting pain from her low back prevented her from taking another. Cara grimaced, but corrected herself with a winsome smile that the medic returned. "Give me a minute."

"God damn it, Cara! You're hurt! Baby, please. It's okay if you tell me."

She didn't. She was being obtuse, but why tell him about her ankle and low back? What was he going to do? Shaking her head, she walked toward the snowmobile. "I want my pole, Lucas."

"Don't worry, I won't come down without it. I don't know what's going on in that pretty head of yours, but I will find out."

Sitting astride behind the driver, Cara looked at Lucas. She realized it was foolish to hide the truth from him. Why not just say it? He would never leave her alone until she did. *Fine*. She'd spill it all out. After that, she would move on.

## Chapter Three

\* \* \* \*

The drive from Whistler Lodge to the cabin was short, but for Lucas it wasn't quick enough. He wanted Cara home right that minute so she could rest. The medic had wrapped a cold compress on Cara's ankle, but he could tell it wasn't easing Cara's pain. It could be she was stiff from long hours of skiing or she had seriously injured herself and wasn't telling him or anyone about it. When he saw her lying on the small bed in the First Aid and Emergency Room, his heart had stopped beating. She had looked tiny, vulnerable, and utterly sad. About what, he had no freaking idea. Although the thought that maybe she was thinking about Rick came to mind, which he quickly dismissed. Fuck, he was freaking jealous of a man he never even met.

As soon as they reached the cabin, Cara got out of the car and ignored his hand when he tried to help her. Before the night was over, he would find out what had changed her attitude toward him. And if she told him she was irritated because she missed her fucking boyfriend, he'd find him and shoot the man between his eyes.

He watched Cara walk as if wearing a body cast. In one swift move, he picked her up. "Don't tell me you're fine. You're not. And stop narrowing your pretty eyes at me. Not working."

"Feeling tired doesn't mean there's something wrong with me."

"You're not just tired. You hurt your back. Stop denying it. I'm not blind."

"No you're not. So you can see that I don't want to be—never mind."

"What? Be around me, close to me, talk to me? Yeah, I noticed. But I want to know why. Give me enough reason why and I'll stay away from you. For now, you need to stay in your room. No skiing tomorrow. And you are not going to the Wish Tree Fundraiser tonight."

"Fine! That's what I wanted anyway. I want to stay in my room. You all go and leave me alone."

"You know what, Cara. You remind me of Amy when she was five. I won't be surprised if you call me poophead." Cara buried her face at the crook of his neck. He felt her smile. And it felt damn good.

The front door burst open and out came Amy, his mother and father.

"Lucas! What happened? Is she okay?"

"She's fine mom. I'll take her to her room."

On his way to Cara's room Lucas told his family bits about what he believed had happened. When he added Cara was being stubborn for keeping the truth and what hurt, she pinched his chest. His family followed them all the way to Cara's bedroom.

He let his mother fuss over Cara, listened to Amy blame herself for being such a horrible friend, and pretended to agree with his dad when he complained about the usher who let Cara ski without a buddy on a rough run.

When he noticed Cara falling asleep, most likely from the combination of fatigue and painkiller the medic gave her, he asked his family to leave the room. They acquiesced right away.

"This is embarrassing you know. You're treating me like an invalid."

The bed dipped a little bit from his weight when he sat on the edge. He touched her sun and wind burned cheeks. The pinkish red hue gave her a healthy glow. "What happened, Cara?"

"I fell. The tips of my ski caught the side of the jump. I flipped, tumbled and landed on my back. That's what happened." Her voice was soft and sounded sleepy.

The medic told him to watch Cara's foot for any sign of internal injuries because she refused to be taken to the nearby clinic for an x-ray. She'd be in pain tonight. Tomorrow, he'd take her at the clinic to make sure she didn't have any fractures.

"Good to finally hear what happened at the Devil's run, but I am asking about us. What happened?" He should wait until she was rested, but he couldn't stop himself from asking.

"You should know what happened." Cara rubbed her nose on the pillow. "What did you give me? It makes me feel like I'm floating. I won't be able to walk. Amy and I are going to attend the fundraising event and I want to—" She let out a loud yawn. "See the Christmas Wish Tree and join the fundraising."

"It's a strong pain killer. I already told you, you can't go to the fundraiser tonight. You can see the tree tomorrow. That is if your foot is better. Cara, baby. I know you just want to sleep, but tell me what changed your mind about us."

Cara closed her eyes and let out a sigh the way a tired person would when finally finding a spot to rest. "I feel like a feather blown by the wind."

"We'll talk tomorrow. I want to know why you turned your back on me."

For a minute, he thought she was already asleep, but Cara opened her eyes to look at him. "To forget my pain."

"What are you talking about?"

"I believed what you told me—we were going to talk when you got back. You came back all right, but to flaunt Rochelle. So I figured when you said we'd talk, you were just promising me something so I wouldn't cry all over you, especially since I surrendered my virginity to you."



He should have known she'd be jealous of Rochelle. "I'm sorry baby. There's a reason why I'm with her right now."

"Yeah. You didn't want to upset your beauty queen." Cara yawned. Her eyes were already half closed.

"Did Amy tell you about me meeting Rochelle in Florida?"

"Hmm?"

"How did you find out about Rochelle and I?"

"Rochelle called Amy." Cara let out a loud yawn, rubbed her nose on the pillow.

"Cara, just a minute and you can sleep. Answer me. Did you go out with Rick because you heard about Rochelle?"

"I'm sorry I wasn't friendly to you Lucas. It's just it hurts to see you..."

"You shouldn't be jealous of Rochelle. You know why? Cara?" Cara's even and soft breathing told him she was asleep already. He wondered if she would remember tomorrow what he had just said. He leaned forward and kissed her. For a moment, he stayed in his position staring at Cara while she slept. "I love you, baby," he whispered in her ear. "Hear me? I love you." He waited for a reaction. Nothing. He loved her so much. It was too damn bad his job got in a way. He didn't want to leave that morning especially when things were going so much sweeter between them.

The DEA gave him the case about Ramon Rivera, the cunning, heartless ass-hole suspected of supplying illegal drugs to young girls aspiring to become beauty queen or models. The drugs, he was told, were supposed to keep the girls' bodies skinny. So far, those who admitted taking the drugs were not only blackmailed, but raped as well. The drugs were nothing but date rape pills. And then the victims, once used and degraded, were forced to take cocaine—to supply and use to keep them from talking. Rivera was one slick son of a bitch. Be that as it may, he'd find the asshole and truss him up like the pig he was. And through Rochelle, he'd find him.

He watched Cara for a couple more minutes. After planting a kiss on her slightly parted lips, he left the room.

\* \* \* \*

Rochelle stepped back to hide behind the potted houseplant as she watched Lucas leave Cara's room. Through the bedroom window, she had seen how Cara clung to Lucas, without a doubt enjoying his hold on her.

*Bitch! Playing weak to get Lucas's attention.* And Lucas's family believed her drama. Weak minded people.

She hated Cara the first time she met her and she hated her more now. The woman was a threat to her, a rival for Lucas's attention.

She won her Miss Washington title because she knew how to play the game. Whatever it took, she'd make sure by the end of the year she was the one wearing Lucas's ring. If she had to cut the bitch's throat, she'd do it. Just to get rid of her.

*Hmm, why not? And I know how to do just it.*

\* \* \* \*

Cara woke up to the smell of fresh coffee, clam chowder, and fried fish. Her stomach rumbled at the thought of food. The cabin was big, but with its design—open kitchen, dining room, and living room in one spacious room—whenever someone started cooking the smell floated up to the upstairs where all the bedrooms were. She looked between the partly opened curtains. First, one star winked at her then another and another. Wow, she slept the day away.

Sighing, she listened for someone to come, to ask if she needed anything or something to make her feel more comfortable as if she was queen of the Nile. But she didn't hear a sound.

For the first time in two days since Lucas had carried her up to her room, she opened her eyes without anyone rushing to her side. No one was around.

*Thank god!* It was nice to be pampered and be taken care of, but after a while, her condition felt like an imposition. The McLeod's had been nothing but good to her. She'd make sure to thank them. But first, she needed a shower. A long and hot one. Cara got up and went to the bathroom. A hot shower would be good on her back. The pain was almost gone. Just a bit of a soreness, but she could move. Her ankle however was still sore when she put pressure on it. She searched for a camisole and underwear in her suitcase then walked in the bathroom.

The hot water felt wonderful on her shoulders. If it weren't so bad to stay for hours in the shower, she would have done it. But she believed in conservation and protecting nature. Cara washed and rinsed in a matter of fifteen minutes. Hair bound in a towel and wearing her underwear camisole, she walked back in her room.

"I see you're up and about?"

Cara stopped in her tracks. Lucas stood in the middle of her room. As usual, he looked rugged in his shoulder length wavy hair, long sleeved shirt and faded low rider jeans. He stared at her unsmiling. "Yes. If I stay one more day in that bed, I'll go nuts. I came here to celebrate the holidays not to eat and sleep like a cow on a pasture. There are only three days before Christmas and I want to enjoy every minute of them. So, if you don't mind, please leave so I can get dressed and go downstairs to join everyone."

"Aside from Rochelle, there's only you and me left in the house. They all went to see the Christmas Wish Tree."

"Oh, it must be covered with paper wishes now."

"Yeah. A lot of people are hanging their wishes on the tree. You're looking forward to hanging yours?"

"Amy and I are supposed to do it together."

"Well, you'd better put on your warm clothes. I'll walk you there."

"You don't have to. I know where to find the tree. It's standing in the middle of the village shining bright with Santa and his elves guarding it."

"Being stubborn again, are you?"

"No. I just hate to impose. Don't worry I have a cellphone. If I tumble again and break another part of my body, I'll buzz Amy."

"Cellphones are as useless as a priest's balls if the owner doesn't answer it."

Cara was so close to rolling her eyes. Lucas was talking about his three calls on her cell that were left unanswered. "Answering machines are useless if the caller doesn't use them to leave his messages. Well, you go on ahead. Looks like the moon is full tonight. Perfect for a romantic walk. You and your Rochelle are probably looking forward to a moonlit walk."

A faint light twinkled in the depths of his eyes the color of deep blue sea. "We're all going to walk together."

The idea of seeing the two walking, holding hands or with Lucas's arm wrapped protectively around Rochelle's shoulders produced a severe pain in her whole being. Cara bit her lower lip to prevent herself from wincing. She knew it was just a dream when she heard Lucas whisper I love you to her. But that dream was stuck in her head, keeping her from hoping that it would someday become a reality for him to say it to her. Why? Because she was stupid.

"Seeing you are ready, why don't you go on—"

"Be downstairs in ten minutes. Like I said, dress in something warm. You'll need more than a camisole and a thong to go out in the snow."

Cara looked down at herself then gasped. Her nipples were puckered and pressed against her camisole, but her thong was all together different. She was practically exposed. "Out!"

Lucas's laughter echoed in her ears. "Ten minutes or I'm coming back in here."

His mere presence made her forget she stood practically naked in front of him. "Leave if you want me downstairs."

Wearing a thick black Northface coat, black bonnet that she knotted under her chin, and black snow boots, Cara walked behind Lucas and Rochelle. While the two were arm in arm, whispering in each other's ears, Cara was busy trying to stay upright and ignoring the two. Even with her snow boots on, snow, when compacted, was slippery. The duo crossed the street and was getting farther away from her, but she didn't care. She'd rather walk alone anyway. Cara stopped when a patrol snowmobile drove by. She was about to cross when her sore ankle gave in beneath her and she landed on her butt.

"Take my hand. I don't bite."

She looked up and met a pair of dark eyes. Lovely, of all the places to slip, it had to be here. Cara took the man's offered hand and smiled. She noticed his rock-star hair. Awesome, she thought.

"Thanks. So embarrassing landing on my tush like that."

"Don't worry about it. It happens to me all the time."

Cara laughed. "All the time, huh?"

"You're not hurt?"

"Just my ego." Cara looked back at Lucas and Rochelle. They were almost out of her sight and didn't even notice she wasn't following them anymore. *Who cares.*

"I'm Karsen with a K. I ski here a lot."

Where was this hot skier when she was alone on the Devil's Jump? She bet any woman wouldn't mind being stuck somewhere as long as he was around. Cara looked at Karsen's offered hand. Yeah, she waited for her pulse to leap the way it normally would when Lucas was around. Nothing. She knew why. Karsen wasn't Lucas. "Please to meet you Karsen with a K. I am Cara with a C."

"It's my pleasure meeting the woman who captivated the attention of the staff here."

Cara frowned. "How did I manage to do that?"

"Heard you had a bit of an accident at the Devil's Jump."

"How did you know it was me?"

"The staff described you well. A beautiful woman."

A flatterer. "You asked about me?"

"Couldn't help it. The lure to know who you are is so strong, hard to resist."

"To know who the clumsy idiot who skied alone."

"You weren't the only one who had done that. By the way, it's not idiotic to ski alone. You took the challenge. You're brave. I like that in a woman."

"Thanks for trying to make me feel good."

"Where are you heading, Cara?"

"To the Christmas Wish Tree. I haven't done my wishing yet."

"Great. I am heading that way, too. I'll walk you there. A beautiful woman like you shouldn't be alone in a place like this."

"She's not alone. She's with me."

Cara didn't have to turn around. She knew who stood behind her. "Karsen, this is my friend's brother Lucas." She glanced back at Lucas, scowled then gave Karsen a winsome smile. "He happened to be here when I fell. A knight saving a damsel in distress."

"Such flattery, my lady. So, you're the agent who found Cara." Karsen offered his hand to Lucas. "Great job. Devil's Jump is known for its tricky run."

"Lucas McLeod." Lucas shook Karsen's hand before turning to Cara. "Cara has the tendency to lose her way. Now I know what to get her for Christmas—a leash. Ready to go?"

"Yes, but I'm going with him. Karsen offered to take me to the Wish Tree." She tried to hide her annoyance in front of Karsen. *A leash. Yeah, to wrap around your neck.*

Lucas stared at Cara with a straight face. "Cara, you are walking with me."

"I'll find you at the base of the tree, Cara. Now that Agent McLeod is here, I think you're going to be safe." He surprised Cara by taking her hand and kissing her knuckles. "I'll be there. Nice meeting you, Agent."

"I'll be looking for you." She waved at Karsen and waited until he disappeared among the crowds before she faced Lucas. He was looking at her as if her head suddenly multiplied in front of him. "A leash. You will give me a leash for Christmas."

"Seems a perfect gift. It's such a short walk from our cabin to the tree, but you got lost. Maybe—"

"I didn't get lost. I stopped to talk to Karsen. If you were not ogling your girlfriend and looked back to see me once in a while, you would have seen what happened."

"You landed on your butt."

"Yes. Lucky me Karsen was here to help me."

Arms akimbo, he narrowed his eyes at her. "So you decided to flirt with him."

"You must have mistaken me with someone else. I don't flirt, Lucas."

Lucas pulled his skullcap down shaking his head. "What happened to you Cara? What happened to us?"

"Us? There is no us, Lucas. We were just friends."

"Yeah? The way you introduced me to Karsen. I'm just your *friend's* brother."

Cara bristled. She should have at least said he was a friend, but at the time he made her angry and she didn't even want to be friends.

"There was an us until you broke it, Cara."

"How?"

"Instead of waiting for me to come home you dated, what's his name? Rick?"

"I dated Rick because you—what? You thought I didn't wait? You thought while you're gone I simply went on a date? Hey! For your information, big lug, I dated Rick because I heard about you and Rochelle getting back together. Do you have any idea how I counted every minute and second of the day, using the mental power I didn't have to make the time go by faster so I could see you. And then your Rochelle called to tell Amy that you two hooked up."

"She's part of why I went to Florida. Job related."

"What kind of job?" She put emphasis on the last word.

Lucas tsked. "Such a dirty mind, baby."

"You work for the DEA, not with the pageant business. The only connection I see between the two is your relationship with Rochelle."

"Give me time and I'll explain everything."

"Well then, while I am waiting, I will continue thinking that your promise of a talk is just that. An empty promise."

"Work didn't give me the opportunity. Calling you or my family was the last thing I had on my list because it's a must for me to keep my head clear. Still, I thought of you when bullets weren't whizzing past my head."

"What bullet?"

"Nothing. Cara, baby—"

She quickly waved aside whatever it was he wanted to say. "You seriously pissed me off so to forget about you, I went out with him. But we broke up anyway because you, like a freaking tick under my skin, bugged me all the time. An itch that won't go away. So don't you dare accuse me of breaking whatever we had."

"Did you hear what I just said?"

"Yes, you went to Florida to see Rochelle and you didn't have time to call me."

"Wow. You're so green from jealousy Kermit the Frog would be jealous if he saw you."

"Funny. You should join the circus."

\* \* \* \*

Cara turned away, stomping her feet on the slushy snow. If she looked back, she would have seen the grin spread on Lucas' face.

Lucas watched Cara walk pass Rochelle like a soldier marching, her hands straight on her side. Did she just call him a big lug and a tick? Laughter escaped his mouth. He couldn't help it. Cara had just admitted that she cared for him. Like the warmth a fireplace provided, Cara's words heated up the cold part of his heart caused by her refusal to acknowledge his presence. She thought he and Rochelle were back together. Like a clear sky after a heavy rain, everything that had happened in the past week made sense. Cara ignoring him. Her cold greeting. Cara was really jealous.

What the heck. He'd met women in the past, but only Cara could jumble his senses.

When the right time comes, he'd explain to Cara why he was chummy with his ex-high school sweetheart again. For now, he'd focus on his task. Squeeze information from Rochelle about Ramon Rivera.

Amy and his parents had already secured a table and were sipping cocoa when they made it to the town center. Lucas waved back at them and was about to join the group when Rochelle pulled him over to the Starbucks station. He looked back at Cara. She met his gaze then strode toward his sister. The two hugged and left the table. *Most likely to get their paper to hang on the tree.* He wondered what Cara would write for a wish.

The original version of *Jingle Bells* floated in the air. A man in a Santa suit ringing his bell followed by three little people in Elves outfits urged the crowd to join the singing. Lucas took in the beauty of the surroundings. Trees bright with Christmas lights looked so pretty as if they were all covered with fireflies. The ten feet Christmas tree adorned with colorful ornaments from

teddy bears to small bells stood in the middle of the village like a giant. Except, unlike a giant, the tree was mighty pretty. There was an atmosphere of excitement. Everyone was felicitous, enjoying their vacations, the holiday with pleasure obvious on their faces. He loved the holiday season, but right that moment all he wanted was Cara. To have her beside him. To feel her warmth and share his with her.

He spotted Cara and Amy again checking the table laden with all kinds of cakes specially baked for the auction. From where he stood, it looked like the two were bidding on every cake. He bet Amy would bid on a carrot cake and Cara on a double chocolate layered cake. It was incredible how the two could eat sweet desserts like hungry barbarians and still manage to keep their slim shapes. *Good*. At least scums selling diet pills wouldn't victimize them. Not that Amy and Cara were fool enough to fall for the scams. But there were those who fell victim to the lure of companies selling vitamins and medications to keep a slim waist. Why? Because society defined beauty as tall, slim and fat-free. Freaking shallow view and destructive. How many teenagers killed themselves because they thought they were too fat and unattractive?

Lucas felt a gentle touch on his arm. Rochelle held two cups of steamy hot lattes.

"Nine dollars, Lucas."

"I'll take care of it. Why don't you join my parents? I'll be right there."

"Sure, darling." Rochelle smiled then sashayed her way to the table.

Lucas tried to get a glimpse of Amy and Cara, but the throng of people grew thicker by the minute. He paid for the coffee, greeted the young woman behind the counter a happy holiday, then wound his way to the spot where he last saw Cara. With his six feet and two inches height, he towered over most people. His height also gave him the advantage to spot the man Cara met earlier—Karsen. His gaze followed Karsen's line of vision.

Karsen looked in a hurry to reach Cara. Most likely to grab the paper Cara was in the process of tying on the highest part of the tree that she could reach. The man was surely pissing him off.

In his haste, Lucas nearly tripped on a little man whose head barely reached his knees.

"Hey, pal! Watch it. Little people around, you know."

"Sorry," he quickly said then looked back at Karsen who, despite the noise, must have heard the little man's voice.

To Lucas's surprise, the man stopped walking, looked at him, then grinned. He couldn't tell what it was, but the son of a bitch sent cold dread slithering down his spine. It was as bone-chilling as finding himself face to face with death. Lucas answered with a curt nod of acknowledgment.

Karsen disappeared behind a booth.



"Hey, how about gingersnap cookies? Money goes to the Children's Hospital Cancer Research."

"Give me a box." Lucas said without taking his eyes off Cara who laughed at whatever his sister said to her.

"Ten fifty."

Lucas took the box from the man and handed him his twenty. "Keep the change." With a careful stride, he dodged people and walked toward Cara.

Flecks of snow began to fall. The atmosphere turned the crowd's cold feeling to a buoyant spirits. People laughed as downy white snow blanketed tables and chairs. Children looked up at the sky with their tongues sticking out catching the biggest flakes they could spot. One by one, couples started dancing unmindful of who was watching. This, Cara thought, was what it must be like being inside a snow globe. So beautiful, romantic, and freezing.

"Do you think someone would try to get our papers and grant our wishes?"

Cara grinned at Amy who'd been biting her nails since they hooked the small red folded paper on the tree. Both of them picked the highest spot, but still reachable. "Why ever not?"

"Well, in case you haven't noticed. Most people hung their paper wishes down below where anyone could get them easily. Ours are way up there as if we didn't want anyone to pick them and we didn't exactly ask for a bread toaster or a pair of Gortex gloves. What if an old, prune man happens to pick your paper?"

"Then one prune man will be happy before Christmas."

"Ewww! Cara, I think we should get the papers back and wish for a box of underwear instead. A wicked night before Christmas is just too wicked. I don't even know what it entails. The word wicked could be interpreted as anything from pole dance to lick a snow covered post."

"Don't be silly. Of course, no one will answer our wishes."

"Okay, what if someone did and he happens to look like a hot cowboy, ruggedly handsome, with lips so sensual butterflies would flicker in your belly just by looking at them."

"Well, then we'll have the best Christmas present ever."

Amy laughed and gave her a high-five. "You are so naughty. So we're supposed to pick a wish and make it come true for whoever hung it."

"Yup. Well, I pick this one." Cara unhooked the small folded piece of paper and opened it.

Amy followed suit. "Wow, this is easy. A bird cage. How about yours?"

"A Starbucks Home Barista. Crap! That's expensive."

"Put it back and pick another one."

"That's cheating, Amy. I suppose this is better than one wicked night. All I have to do is go to Starbucks and buy one."

"Yup. You don't have to get hot and sweaty."

Amy and Cara burst out laughing. On their way back to the auction table, through Cara's peripheral view, she saw Lucas. She turned, but he didn't stop walking. He disappeared among the crowd.

## Chapter Four

\* \* \* \*

Smiling, Rochelle moved her body with Lucas in sensual rhythm while the crowd sang along with the most stupidest song ever, *Feliz Navidad*. Why the hell would they want to sing in Spanish? She bet they didn't even understand the lyrics. This wasn't she wanted. A warm and soft bed was what she had in mind for a great night. Not this. So full of crap. Whoever thought of selling cakes as a way to raise money should be shot. She felt like she already gained ten pounds just thinking about a slice of cake. It had been so long since she had one. And the row of delicious looking desserts on the table was a temptation she didn't need.

She looked at her watch. Ramon said he'd call back. *He better. That ass*. If she hadn't threatened him with snitching him to the feds, he wouldn't have agreed to help with her plan. What a bastard.

Her ankle throbbed so badly, Cara couldn't stand anymore. She and Amy danced for hours and now her foot screamed from pain. The McLeods were having so much fun. Lucas's parents saw an old acquaintance and had been chatting their night away. Rochelle and Lucas were in the middle of the dance area. The two looked ready to gobble each other's faces. She bet they would have, too, if no one were around. Amy met Steve and the two were now dancing in the moonlight. *Snowflakes of Love* echoed in the night. Sitting alone at the table, watching love arc around her, her heart ached as much as her foot. She should just go back to the cabin, rest her foot and take Tylenol PM.

She waved to Amy hoping to get her attention, but her friend was busy laughing with Steve. Cara sighed. Well, she supposed it would be okay to leave without letting Amy know. Her friend would only insist that she walk her back to the cabin no matter how much fun she was having. Yeah, she'd go now and call Amy's cellphone when she returned to the cabin.

Ambling her way back to village's main road, she hugged her coat tight around her. The farther she got from the Wish Tree, the less people she saw walking around. It was almost two in the morning and the whole village was still alive. Stores were still open, restaurants filled with customers to the brim. Everyone seemed happy, enjoying the night one would think it was already, Christmas. She wished. As it happened, she'd have to wait a few more days before she could go home. Back to Seattle where she belonged. For now, she would just have to endure the pain from watching and hearing Lucas and Rochelle flirt with each other.

The only light left at the McLeod cabin was the porch light. Cara tipped the small clay pot then ran her fingers underneath to find the house key. She found it buried in the small pack of dirt. Wiping her hand on her ski pants, she unlocked the door. She was about to step inside when someone touched her elbow. Instinctively, she pulled her arm and swirled around.

"Easy, Cara. It's me."

"Karsen. Sheez! You scared me. What are you doing here?"

"Following you."

"Why?"

"I should think it's obvious. May I come in?"

"The McLeods are not here. I don't think—"

"I know they're not here. That's why I followed you." Karsen pushed the door open, grabbed her wrist and dragged her inside.

Her heart thumped harder against her chest when she heard the lock click into place. "Karsen, what are you doing?"

"Doing my job, darling."

"What job?"

"To get rid of you."

Cara's legs began to fold beneath her. If it weren't for the console table she grabbed hold of, she would have collapsed on the floor. "Why?"

"Nothing personal, darling. Just doing my job."

*Oh god, he's going to shoot me. I will bleed. I hate blood. Think Cara, think. Don't panic.* "Can I turn this lamp on? I can't see."

"Sure. At least you'll see a handsome face before you go, eh?"

Cara didn't think he looked handsome right now, but kept the thought to herself. "So, you have a boss telling you what to do. You're a runner or a lackey or a boy doing your master's bidding."

"Shut the fuck up. Don't make me rethink about what I'm going to do with you. I like you, Cara and I don't want you to suffer. But if you won't keep your mouth shut, I might just bleed you dry, watch you die slowly. Do you want that?"

"No. Do you mind telling me what I did wrong? I think I deserve to know."

"You did nothing wrong really. But the bitch wants you out of the way. She asked Rivera for help and threatened him that she'll go to the cops if he didn't give her this one favor."

Cara shook her head. What Karsen said didn't make any sense at all. "I'm sorry, but I don't know any Rivera. Who is this bitch who wants me out of the way?"

"Miss Washington, Rochelle Luna. The loony bitch is jealous of you. She figured when you're gone, Lucas McLeod will love her instead of you."

"Lucas loves me?"

"Cara, don't tell me you are that fucking blind."

*Oh my god.* "Rochelle asked Rivera to get rid of me. So he hired you to kill me because Rochelle wants me dead."

"That pretty sums it up. Rivera will do this one favor for her and it'll be her turn."

"Turn for what?"

"Rivera hates bitches. He doesn't have time for them. Rochelle is not only a bitch but also a pain in the ass. When you're in pain, what do you do?" Karsen's eyes brightened as if the thought of killing excited him.

"And what do you get in return?"

"Everything a man like me wants in life. Money, young and untouched pussies, vacations reserved only for the rich."

And a place in hell, she wanted to add but thought better of it. "Earlier, when I fell. You didn't just happen to be there. You were following me."

"Yes. But your boyfriend came back for you. If it weren't for that prick, I could have been back in Florida enjoying a fresh wannabe Miss Universe. Now turn around."

*Where the hell did Cara go?* Lucas looked around. Last time he saw her she sat alone at the table. Fishing his cellphone out of his coat pocket, he dialed Amy's number. His sister answered after the third ring.

"Hey Sis, have you seen Amy?"

"No. She said she'd sit down for a bit. Her foot is sore."

"Where are you?" Lucas started walking toward the ladies bathroom.

"Over by the coffee stand. Is Cara missing?"

"No. She probably went home. I'll find her. I'll call you."

Standing by the ladies bathroom, he peeked in. The bathroom was empty. He called Cara's name. No answer.

Walking as fast as he could, he headed back to the cabin. The sound of a snowmobile had him turning around. The vehicle passed him then turned around to stop in front of him.

"Sir, need a ride?"

The driver was the medic he met when he went searching for Cara at the Devil's Jump. The cabin was just walking distance from the town center. But if he could save a minute from riding the snowmobile, why not. "Yes."

A few yards away from the cabin, the medic received an emergency call. Lucas understood. "I can get off here. Thanks, man."

"No problem." The medic turned the snowmobile around with its siren on and took off.

The only part of the house that was lit was the receiving room. He remembered turning all the lights off. So someone was inside. Instinct had Lucas checking the tracks on the fresh snow. Two sets of boot prints were visible. Cara wasn't alone.

Did she leave the center without telling anyone because she and whoever was inside planned to rendezvous here? Impotent rage and jealousy had him kicking the hard snow. It hit and knocked one of the dwarves his mother placed on the walkway. He bent to straighten the dwarf when he glimpsed movement. Stepping closer to the window, he saw Karsen with his gun pointing at Cara. *What the fuck!* The adrenalin to charge in, to smash Karsen's face with his fist, surged in his body. There was the slim chance Karsen would miss Cara, but he wouldn't take it. Years of training had him using his good sense instead. He circled the cabin and used the side door. Using his Dyno Kwik lock pick he carried in his pocket, he managed to open the door without making a single noise.

Lucas kept his eyes on Karsen. He listened while Karsen talked. The fucking pig was Rivera's runner. When he told Cara to turn around, he made a quick decision. He moved in, gun drawn, pointing at Karsen.

"Drop your gun, Karsen." *Damn, damn.* He'd been in a situation like this before, but never, not even once had he felt like this—scared. So many different scenarios started running in his head. What if he hadn't noticed her gone? She'd be dead by now. *Focus, Lucas. She's still here. Focus.* "I'll blow your fucking empty head off to feed to the pigs, Karsen. Lower your gun."

"Ah, the dashing hero. Good, two jobs in one night. This'll be good. You, dickhead, are the one going to lower your gun. But if you don't want to see her pretty face anymore then don't."

"No Lucas. He'll shoot you."

"You okay, Cara?"

"I am fine Lucas. He's not. He's shallow and evil and not even handsome."

"Shut the fuck up." Karsen aimed his gun higher. The barrel pointed directly at Cara's heart.

"Take it easy, Karsen. Let's talk. You shouldn't do this. Testify against Rivera and I promise you protection and less time in jail."

"Ha! Couldn't get anything from Rochelle? Isn't that why you're clinging to her like a leech hoping to suck out information from her? Oh yeah. You're not a slick Agent, you know. Rochelle told us everything she knows about you in exchange for a hit. She's a fucking cocaine addict. Now throw your gun on the floor, Lucas. I am done talking."

"No! Lucas, don't do it. Hey, cabbage head. Have you seen Paris in winter? Take a look."

Before he could understand what Cara was about, she grabbed the snow globe sitting on the table and threw it at Karsen. But she wasn't quick enough. Karsen fired. The sound of Karsen's gun and his reverberated around the cabin, shaking the glass windows and rattling the chandelier.

Karsen's body crashed on the coffee table breaking the glass bowl of nuts. Cara remained standing, her face pale and eyes wide staring at him. "Cara, love." He rushed to her side in time before she hit the floor. And then he felt something sticky. Cara's blood.

"Lucas," Cara mumbled his name and then closed her eyes.

Lucas felt the moment Cara lost consciousness. Her body sagged. "Oh my god, Cara. Cara!"

## Chapter Five

\* \* \* \*

Stars glittered like sequins on the dancer's dress while the moon shared its subtle glow illuminating the water down below. Cara stood outside the veranda with her arms around her midriff as she listened to the sound of water kiss the snow covered shore. The Puget Sound looked mysterious at night, like a black charcoal painting hiding its meaning.

Her arm itched again. A sign that her small bullet wound was healing. She couldn't believe it was only two days ago when she was close to dying. Lucky. Yeah, that she was. Karsen's aim had shifted when Lucas shot him on the right shoulder. If he hadn't...Well, no need to dwell on a nightmare. Karsen wouldn't follow her again and with Rochelle locked up she had nothing to worry about. She hoped the DEA could flush Rivera out and stop his drug and prostitution trafficking.

She couldn't believe Rochelle would hire someone to have her killed because of love. Love. Such simple word and yet powerful enough to weaken even a man, to blind anyone to do things deemed stupid, like throwing a snow globe at a man holding a gun. Stupid or not she'd do it again. When she saw Lucas lower his gun a fraction, she acted. She would have taken Karsen's bullet rather than see Lucas get shot. She loved him that much.

Too bad though, she never got to thank him. At the hospital, Amy told her Lucas couldn't see her because of the investigation. Her parents, who flew back from Italy, drove her back to Seattle. Although they insisted they stay with her, she refused. She had enough coddling to last her a lifetime. Now here she was, alone on Christmas eve.

Like last year and the year before. The cold wind blew, nipping her skin. She decided to go back inside. She was closing the sliding glass door when two quick raps sounded outside her door. Cara looked at the clock. It was eleven thirty at night. Who would come knocking at this hour?

*Please don't tell me Rivera sent another hoodlum to kill me.*

Holding her breath, she looked through the peephole. Lucas stood on the other side wearing a Santa hat.

"Are you going to open the door or are you going to just stare at me through the peephole."

Cara opened the door wide and stood aside when Lucas walked in carrying a shopping bag. "What are you doing here? It's late."

"I know. Nice pajamas."

Cara groaned. If she had known he would stop by she would have worn her nightgown instead of an old oversized gray t-shirt that reached the middle of her thighs. "Thanks. My favorite. Really comfy."



"I bet. Cold in here."

"I was outside a minute ago. Love the hat."

"Thanks." He opened the Nordstrom shopping bag. "Here, got to wear your own."

"Raindeer's antlers. Way cooler." Cara put on the headband. "How do I look?"

"Good. I bet you'll look better if you add this. Come here."

Cara took a step forward then stopped when she was an arm length away. But Lucas grabbed the front of her shirt and gently pulled her closer. Obsession. This close she could smell the faint scent of his cologne. She stared at Lucas and waited.

Lucas took out a piece of small red foam with a small incision. Smiling, he attached the foam on the tip of her nose. "There. Perfect."

Before Cara could say anything Lucas's mouth covered hers for a hard kiss. He kissed her with a hunger that belied his outward calm. "Cara," he breathed her name and wrapped his arm around her for a tight embrace.

For a while, they stood that way. Lucas's hands moving up and down her back, smoothing her hair. His nearness gave her comfort so overwhelming she wanted to cry. Cara buried her face against his chest and listened to his heart beating loudly against her ears.

"Tell me you're real, love. Tell me you're here with me."

Cara lifted her head to look at him. "I'm here. Why wouldn't I be?"

"I thought I lost you."

"No. You haven't. I'm still here. In flesh and blood."

"You're one silly woman to think you could face a man pointing a gun at you with a snow globe."

"I'd do it again if I could prevent you from getting hurt. I love you that much."

Almost violently, Lucas gathered her into his arms for another tight hug. "You have no idea how I longed to hear you say that."

"What about you? Why did you consider lowering your gun? I saw it in your eyes Lucas."

"Need I tell you, Cara? You're my world, my life, my love. Because of you, I fought to stay alive when death was close. I love you more than life itself."

Her heart sang with delight. Hearing him say that he loved her cast away the shadows across her heart. "I am so sorry, Lucas. For hurting you. For being stupid. For realizing what you were trying to tell me—why you didn't call and why you were with Rochelle—hours too late. You could have been killed. I—"

"I didn't. We're both here. You don't have to explain anything, love. Amy told me why you went out with Rick. And she told me, too, that she wished to become an auntie next year. Would you help me make her dream come true?"

"What are you saying?"

"Marry me."

Cara merely stared at Lucas, tongue-tied. *Did he say marry me? Oh god, did he just propose to me?*

"We don't have to right away if you want to wait. We could get married next year or the year after. Just say yes."

Still shocked from his abrupt proposal, she could do no more than nod her head.

"Yes, you will marry me? Or yes we'll wait till—"

Finally coming out of her stupor, she covered Lucas's mouth with her hand. "Shut up. Yes, I will marry you. Now, tomorrow, later. I love you, Lucas McLeod and yes, I'll help make Amy an auntie."

With a shout of joy, Lucas picked her up and spun her around. Gently, he lowered her on the floor. "You're beautiful."

"Even with a red nose and antlers?"

"Yes. By the way, I'm answering your wish." Lucas fished a small piece of paper out of his pocket.

"Oh! How did you know that's mine?"

"I watched you hang it on the tree."

"Did you notice if Amy was still there? Ours were the only two hanging way up high."

"No. Yours was the only one there."

"Oh dear. Amy had wished for the same thing."

Lucas let out a loud hoot. "That brat wished for a wicked night, too?"

"I wonder who took her wish."

"Who is he? He must be as tall as I am. But I'd better not find out who because I'll kill him."

It was Cara's turn to laugh aloud. "You are one possessive brother."

"That I am. But within the bounds of reason." Lucas sighed, running his fingers on her cheeks. "A wicked night before Christmas. Tsk, tsk. Silly woman. What am I going to do with you?"

"Grant my wish."

"With me, you'll have more than one wicked night."

"Promise?"

"I don't make empty promises, love. You ask for a wicked night, wicked night you'll get."

"I can't even imagine what a wicked night could be. Like last time?"

"Yes, love. I will kiss every part of you. Suck your breasts, your clit, until you're wet and ready. No missionary position tonight. We'll fuck without inhibitions. This night, baby, will be unforgettable."

With those words, excitement pounded the blood through her heart and chest. Her pulse quickened from anticipation while heat slowly spread from the center of her human being to fan out, to reach all parts of her body. She shivered from wanting to be touched, to be loved.

Lucas kissed her hungrily as he wrapped his arms so tight around her she thought her bones might break.

Cara responded with a low moan. She had dreamed about him coming to her in the middle of the night to take her once again. Now it was finally happening. Giving herself freely to the passion of their kiss, she opened her mouth to let his insistent tongue in. He tasted of red licorice. Cara sucked on Lucas's tongue when he thrust it in again. The simple act created a strong current of hot electricity all the way down her body. It centered in between her legs where she throbbed.

Lucas swept her, as if she weighed nothing, into his arms and carried her into the bedroom. "Cara, I missed you." His body followed as he laid her gently on the bed.

"I missed you, too."

Reclaiming her lips, Lucas crushed her to him. His kiss was urgent, demanding, drugging. Cara felt the hunger in his kiss all the way to her toes. Lifting his mouth a fraction so their lips were still touching, he whispered, "You made me burn so fast, so quick."

His hand lifted her blouse exposing her breasts. Lucas's fiery hot palm caressed her sensitive breasts until her nipples screamed to be touched. "Lucas."

"Hmm, want this?" Lucas's tongue flicked one hard nipple. He repeated the mind shattering action on her other breast before finally trapping one between his lips. And then he sucked her.

Cara's back arched, her fingers dug deep into his scalp. "Don't stop."

"I won't, love." While he tantalized her nipples with his tongue, his hand slid across her belly and gently down to the swell of her hips.

Cara squirmed beneath him. Each lick, each touch served as a torch burning her body, liquefying her bones. Lucas felt so good on top of her with his erection pressed against her pelvis bone. But she wanted his bare skin touching hers. Gripping the edge of his shirt, she pulled it up.

Lucas released his lips from her nipple, removed his shirt then shucked his jeans. "Eager to have me, huh?"

"Better believe it."

"We'd better get rid of your shirt, too, then."

As soon as her shirt landed on the floor, Lucas gave his attention back on her breasts. After a couple hard sucks, he slid down her body. His tongue made a wet path down her ribs to her stomach. Cara lay panting, waiting for Lucas to kiss the part of her that had been throbbing and begging for his attention.

Lucas planted open kisses on her body. When he reached her pubic mound, he nuzzled her nest, then looked up at her. "You're beautiful, Cara. And you're mine. Open your legs for me, love."

Cara licked her lips as she slowly, without shame, spread her legs to make room for his shoulders. "I love you, Lucas."

"I love you, too." He lowered his head and licked her clit.

A moan of ecstasy escaped her lips. "More Lucas, more."

"Yes, baby. I'll give you more." Using his fingers, he spread her lips then ran his tongue up and down her seams. "Hmm...so good. You're so wet and still tight. His two fingers buried deep inside her pussy joined them together.

Cara grabbed the bed sheets when pleasure took her higher. She thrust her hips, meeting Lucas's fingers, urging him to go deeper. Lucas answered by pumping his fingers.

"Like it, baby? How about this?"

Before Cara could give him an answer, he sucked her clit. Cara's lusty moan turned into panting. She was sure anytime soon she'd shatter into million pieces. She wanted to come, to reach her orgasm. Now. "Lucas, this is so good."

"It's good for me, too." Using two fingers, Lucas gently separated her labia. "Ah, you're weeping honey. Fucking beautiful." He massaged her clit with the tip of his tongue until Cara thought she'd go crazy.

"Yes! Like that. Oh my god." She tangled her hands in his hair, pulling his mouth closer.

Lucas's mouth breathed hot fire on her pussy, fanning her already burning body. When he captured her clit and sucked it relentlessly, Cara burst into flames.

Grinning like a satisfied wolf, he scooted off the bed and stood in front of her. Cara watched him shuck his jeans and boxer briefs. His cock jutted out, long and thick and wet on the tip. He looked so magnificent. All muscles from the hard training required by his job. God, she'd never tire looking at him. Just the sight of his lithe athletic form was enough to arouse her again.

"I need a condom." Lucas fished a condom from the back pocket of his jeans, tore the foil with his teeth and made a show of putting it on.

"Don't want a baby yet?"

"Not too soon, love. I'm possessive remember? I'm not ready to share your breasts with anyone."

Leaning forward, he touched her still tender folds, making her whole body quiver. Lucas replaced his fingers with his mouth and kissed her pussy the way he would her mouth. He worshipped her, loved her, and made her head spin from another tide of passion swiftly consuming her body.

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"Lay down on your belly, love." His hands gripped her hips helping her languid body turn. "Now, lift your sweet ass and scoot back toward me. That's it, baby. Ah, you have the sweetest cock-rising ass."

"I want to come again, Lucas. Badly." Cara presented her ass, spreading her legs wider offering what was his to take.

Now he realized how selfish his other girlfriends had been. They had taken and had never been this generous. Lucas would show her how good their nights were going to be, how it should be between couples. This was Cara's second time to have sex, but she was more eager than the women he'd met who boast expertise in bed.

He glided his fingers through the slick folds of her pussy and touched her clit. He wanted to tease her some more, but he was quickly losing his control. Standing directly in front of her ass, he rubbed his dick on her cunt.

Cara hissed and raised her ass higher. "Take me now, Lucas. I can't take this anymore."

"Me, too. Enough foreplay. Now we fuck." Holding his shaft, he eased his engorged head inside her waiting pussy. "Good god." Her slick and once tried tunnel gripped him so tight he nearly ejaculated. And he was just half way in. Taking all his strength to keep his control, he thrust inside her.

Lusty moans muffled by the bed urged him to do it again. One slow stroke followed by another and another. With each thrust, Cara rocked back to meet him, taking all of his length.

"Good girl. Yeah, that's it. Fuck me, love. I'm all yours." He licked his fingers, then touched her clit with them. "Come for me again. I want to feel you come."

His sac made erotic smacking sounds as he pounded Cara harder. Lucas could feel the beginning of his orgasm. But he willed himself not to let go. He wanted Cara to climax while he was buried deep inside her. Licking the same fingers that he used to touch her clit, he spat saliva on the tips then rubbed them on her.

"Lucas, Lucas...I'm coming. Harder, faster.... yes. God, I love this."

"What, love? Say the word. Say it!"

"Fucking! You deep inside."

"This is just the beginning, love." He gripped her hips and pumped deep and fast. Lucas's dick touched her womb increasing the pleasure of each stroke he made.

Cara's muscles clenched, squeezing his cock. "Yes, I'm coming...Lucas!"

"Yeah, baby." Lucas finally released his orgasm. He ground his hips until the last vestige of lust ebbed away.

Cara dropped her weight on the bed. He followed, careful not to give her his full weight. "You okay?"

"That was amazing."

Lucas thought it was more than that. To join his body with Cara brought satisfaction he had never felt with any other woman. Was it because this time love dictated his actions? Of course. That could be it. He loved Cara. They didn't just have sex. They made love. Planting a kiss on Cara's damp shoulder, he got off the bed. "Be right back." He pulled the condom off his aroused cock and went to the bathroom.

Cara was still on her belly when he came back to bed. "You asleep?"

"Close." Cara snuggled with him in spoon fashion. "Are you sleepy?"

"I'm too happy and excited to feel sleepy. Hey, it's only two minutes before midnight." He wedged his thigh in between her legs.

"Oh, it's going to be Christmas soon. Lucas, what do you want for Christmas?"

"I already got it."

"Really? What is it?"

Somewhere, a clock struck twelve. "You. Merry Christmas, Cara."

"Merry Christmas to you, too." Cara wriggled her butt, pressing her still moist pussy on his thigh. "How about a wicked night on Christmas day."

"How about wicked days for the rest of our lives?"

"Oh, I love that, Lucas. Very much."

Lucas sat on his knees, lifted Cara's leg up and placed it on his shoulder. "Me, too. Let me show you."

## About the Author

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Tierney O'Malley began writing her first eBook two years ago when her youngest was in fifth grade. Today there are four eBooks available for purchase on her list. Her first precious eBooks include *To Trust a Wicked Man*, *Three Christmas Kisses*, and *Wicked Proposal*. Ms. O'Malley lives with her husband and children in Seattle Washington, and is currently working on a new novel and sets of series.

Ms. O'Malley is always excited to hear from readers. To leave your comments, questions or suggestions, visit her website at

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