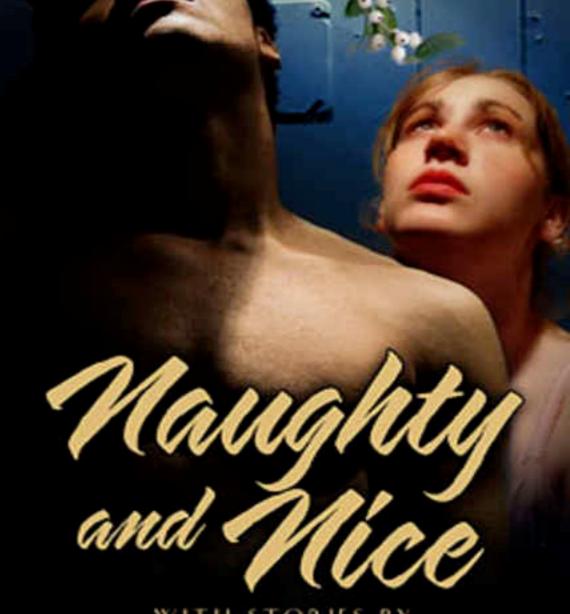
Tiguid Silver Books



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Kissing Clause

by Robin Danner

Dedication

To Kimmie, who helped make Montgomery, Alabama—the setting of this book—so memorable. Good luck at Vanderbilt!

* * * *

At Barrett and Associates, no expense was spared for the annual Christmas party. Guests sipped on costly champagne and sampled treats created by the priciest chef in town, while enjoying the beauty of Cliff Barrett's mansion by the lake.

Alexandra, Cliff's only daughter and the decorator for the party, stood at the top of the stairs leading to the ballroom and admired the twinkling lights and festive atmosphere. Everything had gone off without a hitch this year. In fact, it almost seemed too perfect. There'd been none of the last minute plan changes that usually occurred while organizing one of her father's parties. Looking out at the smiling faces of the guests and the beautifully decorated room, Alex mentally patted herself on the back. Her work was done. Now she was allowed to mingle.

Her gaze went straight to Scott Clause, the golden boy of Barrett and Associates. Scott was a whiz kid who'd breezed through college and law school before landing himself a coveted position at her father's prestigious law firm. He was

the youngest lawyer to become an associate and, in his four years as a lawyer, he had yet to lose a case. But not only was he intelligent and driven, he was also the sexiest man Alex had ever seen. She'd secretly crushed on him for years and tonight, she had decided, was the night to make her interest known. She was more than a little nervous, but determined to let him know how she felt.

Wiping her sweaty palms on a cocktail napkin, Alex started down the stairs. Scott was in the center of the room, surrounded by his usual bevy of attractive women, but that did not deter her. Tonight was going to be her night.

As she made her way across the room, cheerful voices called her name. She waved and smiled, but did not stop to speak to her father's numerous business acquaintances. If she stopped, she would spend the rest of the night caught in inane conversations—and she had something entirely different in mind. Something that required mistletoe and dark rooms.

As she drew close to Scott, she smoothed a hand across her hair. Not a curl out of place. She knew she looked her best. The red gown fit her to perfection and she'd shelled out major bucks to hire a professional hair and make-up artist. Gone were her usual glasses and tidy bun. They were replaced by green tinted contacts and an elaborate up-do. Instead of bulky wools and thick sweaters, Alex was finally showing off the body she'd spent years shaping by attending daily aerobic classes. For the first time in her life, she was using her father's money to her advantage.

Scott was discussing the win of his latest court case when Alex reached his side. Without missing a beat, he put a hand around her waist and drew her along his side as was his custom. Instead of stiffening as *she* always did, Alex leaned further into him. She noticed the catty expressions on some of the women's faces and struggled to keep from smiling. This was going to be a fun night.

Scott smelled good. He was wearing her favorite cologne, and the spicy scent teased her nostrils. She wondered where he sprayed it. Did he put it on before he dressed? Or did he wait and spray it on his clothes? She imagined him emerging from the shower, steam rising from his nude body as he toweled dry. Her mouth watered at the mental image.

Scott's hand tightened against her waist and drew her attention to his face. His gaze searched her body, and she could see the admiration in his eyes as he studied her new look. "How's my pretty girl?"

Her lipstick red lips parted in a smile. He always called her his pretty girl, but for the first time she felt like he meant it. "Just dandy. How are you?"

Scott smiled easily, his dark eyes crinkling at the corners and making him appear much younger than his thirty years. "Hanging in there." He bent down and whispered, for her ears alone, "Thank you for rescuing me. I've been trying to get rid of these vultures for about an hour now."

Alex drew back and gave him an amused look. "You shouldn't tempt them so by acting all sexy and available."

Scott laughed at her jab. "I suppose you're right." He noticed her empty hands. "Would you care for a drink?" He

gestured for a server and ordered without her having to remind him of her favorite drink. "A Bloody Mary for the lady. No celery."

Alex widened her eyes innocently. "I'm impressed. You actually remember what I drink?"

Scott tapped his head. "Photographic memory. I remember lots of things."

Alex wondered if Scott even realized how lucky he was. He was smart, rich, successful, and a genuinely nice guy. He did have a tendency to flirt, but that was the thing she loved most about him. He made every woman around him feel desirable. You would never catch him ignoring a woman just because she wasn't as pretty or as wealthy as the other women there. Sometimes she worried that he only flirted with her because her father was his boss. But it was a known fact that her father doted on Scott, so there was no need for him to play up to the boss's daughter. Add to that his genuine disregard for most rules, and she was sure he was friends with her because he wanted to be, not just to impress her father.

Come to think of it. Where was her father?

Alex allowed her eyes to scan the ballroom until they landed on her tall, graying, but still powerful-looking, father. Cliff Barrett was holding court near the refreshment table, exchanging legal tales with his old fraternity buddies. She thanked her lucky stars at the sight. If her father was drinking with his friends, then he would be occupied with them for most of the night. Alex would be free to pursue Scott with all the seductive ploys available to her. Sadly,

there were not all that many seductive ploys in her arsenal. Most of her plan hinged on her ability to maneuver Scott under the mistletoe she'd hung in her father's office. It was the closest room and the only one guaranteed not to be trespassed into by some of the guests.

The server returned with her drink and Alex accepted it gratefully. If she was going to seduce Scott, a bit of liquid courage was appreciated. As she sipped, she studied Scott over the rim of her glass. He was talking to the wife of one of the lawyers. Alex couldn't remember her name, but she was a beautiful blonde with more hair than common sense. Marley, or Harley, or some silly name like that. Alex was not typically a jealous sort, but it unnerved her to see Scott talking to another woman. She should be used to it, since he'd had more girlfriends in the past year than she had fingers and toes, but it was hard to witness him bringing a rosy flush to the married lady's cheek with his practiced words.

"If you're sure your girlfriend won't mind," Marley, or Harley, or whoever, said with a cautious glance in Alex's direction.

Whoa! Whose girlfriend? Alex's head snapped up. "Pardon?"

Scott gave her a fond look. "Alex, darling. You don't mind if I dance with Carly, do you?"

At least now she had a name to go with the face. "Of course not. It's not like we're da..."

Scott quieted her with a sharp look. Alex's mouth snapped shut. What the hell? Was Scott wanting her to pretend to be his girlfriend? He was practically playing into her hands.

Turning to Carly, Alex smiled easily. "Just be sure you return him in one piece." She spoke nicely, but her eyes clearly said "Hands off, bitch. He's mine."

"Of course," Carly said, and wrapped her hands around Scott's muscular forearm. "Come, Scotty. Let's go dance."

Alex hid a smile at the look on Scott's face. He detested being called Scotty, a fact she knew since he'd once told her about a high school girlfriend who'd called him by the nickname in a sing-song voice every time she saw him. Alex took another sip of her drink and casually observed the couple on the dance floor. Carly was pressed against Scott, who was trying valiantly to dance without stepping on the trailing hem of her dress.

"Why don't you just fuck him and get it over with?"

Alex was so startled she nearly dropped her Bloody Mary. She steadied the glass and glanced at the man who'd snuck up beside her. Thomas Dyer, Carly's husband and Scott's best friend, grinned at her and winked broadly. Alex's guarded expression slowly faded. "Good Lord, Tommy. You nearly gave me a heart attack."

Tommy had been with the company for eight years. Alex had always liked the fun-loving man, although she'd held no great fondness for his last three wives. Carly was currently wife number four, so it was not surprising that Alex had difficulty remembering her name.

Tommy lifted his mug of beer and pointed toward his wife. "Looks like it's about time for a new wife."

Alex felt a burst of horrified laughter. "Tommy! You shouldn't say such things. Scott would never try anything with one of your wives."

"No," he agreed solemnly. "But that doesn't keep *her* from trying to get *him* in the sack."

"I'm sorry," Alex mumbled. She didn't know what to say. Tommy was such a nice guy, a bit outspoken perhaps, but certainly undeserving of having a wife cheat on him.

Tommy shrugged aside her concern and let his eyes drift over her body. His eyes widened with stunned surprise. "Damn, Alex. What happened to you?"

Her stomach lurched. "You don't like it?"

"Hell, yes, I like it! If your father and Scott wouldn't have my balls, I would be tempted to carry you out of here myself." He reached for her hand and made her do a little twirl. He whistled softly. "You clean up good."

"Thank you, Tommy." Alex laughed as he continued ogling. She slapped his arm playfully. "Now quit it. You're making me blush."

Alex felt an arm snake around her waist an instant before she was pulled up against a warm body. "Tommy, are you flirting with my girl?"

She recognized the deep timbre of Scott's voice and gave a delighted shiver. She rested against the hard length of him and provocatively shimmied her hips the tiniest bit. She heard the quick intake of breath Scott made and knew that her ploy had worked. His hand moved to her hip and he subtly pressured her into remaining still.

Tommy put his arm around his wife's shoulder and shook his head. "No, just keeping her entertained." He gave his wife a little squeeze. "Care to dance, sweetheart?"

Carly looked less than enthusiastic about dancing with her husband as she followed him out onto the floor. Scott's hand remained on her waist as he came around to stand in front of her. "Poor Tommy. That woman's a viper."

Alex felt bad for their mutual friend, but her concern for Tommy fled as she gazed up at Scott. She'd seen him so often that his face was as familiar as her own, but tonight it was like seeing him for the first time. His strong jaw, lightly covered with stubble, practically begged her to run her lips across it. His firm mouth, usually smiling, tempted her to lean up and kiss it. She swayed for a moment, unsure what her next move should be. Before she could decide, Scott took charge of the situation.

"Let's dance."

She moved as if in a dream. On the dance floor, Scott wrapped his strong arms around her. She pressed her cheek against his shoulder as her arms came up to encircle his neck. They moved as one, their thighs brushing with each sway of the music. She could feel his breath ruffling the hair above her ear while his hands lightly stroked her back. It was easily the most romantic dance of her life, made even more so when she felt the tickle of his lips against her ear.

"You look beautiful," he whispered.

She felt a rush of heat flood her body even as goose bumps broke out on her skin. "Thank you."

The band was playing her favorite song. As she recognized it, she laughed softly to herself. She was dancing with the best looking guy in the room to her favorite song and he'd just called her beautiful. *Perfect, absolutely perfect.*

Alex forgot all about the other people in the room. In her mind, it was only her and Scott. She pressed herself closer to him and abandoned her mind to the music. She should've known it was too good to last.

"Excuse me, Alexandra."

She felt a tap on her shoulder and groaned inwardly. The night had been going so perfectly. She let her arms drop from Scott's neck and turned to the caterer. "Yes, Martha?"

Martha gave her a sheepish look. "I'm sorry, but your father and his friends are requesting a bottle of brandy from the wine cellar. I tried to fetch it, but the door was locked."

"It's alright, Martha. I forgot to unlock the door earlier. I left the key in my bedroom. I'll go upstairs and fetch it for you." As the caterer hurried away, Alex turned back to Scott. "I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it. I feel like taking a breather anyway. Would you like some company?"

"Sure." Inside her chest, her heart began beating triple time. He was escorting her to her bedroom? Things were turning out even better than she'd planned. She'd hoped to get him alone in her father's office. Being alone with Scott in her bedroom was infinitely better.

As soon as they were out of the ballroom, Scott began patting his pockets. She smiled at the action. "Nicotine fit?" she teased.

Scott sent her a wry glance as he pulled out his pack of cigarettes and lit up. "I'm going to quit."

She lifted an eyebrow. "I've heard that before."

Scott took a long drag and blew the smoke away from her. "Want one?" His dark eyes tempted her to give in as he held the pack toward her. She bit her lip and cast an anxious glance back toward the ballroom. Her father would kill her if he ever learned of her secret habit, but she was craving one mightily.

"Just one," she said, and filched a cigarette. Scott cupped his hand around his lighter and brought it close to her face. She touched his hand with her fingers and leaned in. As the smoke filled her lungs, she sighed with pleasure. "Do you know this is the first cigarette I've had in days?"

Scott blew another trail of smoke toward the ceiling. "Feels good, doesn't it?"

Alex took another puff and nodded. She glanced nervously over her shoulder, expecting her father to pop out and catch her any moment. Scott laughed and tweaked her nose. "You're a grown woman, Alex. Your father's not going to spank you if he catches you smoking."

"I don't want to disappoint him."

"You're not a disappointment," Scott replied. "He should be proud to have a daughter like you. You're beautiful, kind, and the best party organizer I know."

She laughed at his praise. "You forgot sexy, classy, and unforgettable."

"Those, too," he said with a quick nod. "You know I adore you, so stop fishing for compliments."

It was amazing the way words just tumbled from his lips. He could stop her heart with the barest of ease. They'd reached the top of the stairs and he'd turned right without asking for directions to her room.

"Do you even know where you are going?"

He turned back to her, the dim lighting slashing across his handsome face. "Of course I do."

She hurried to catch up with him. "How?"

He smiled unabashedly. "I'm staying next door to you. Earlier, while you were taking a nap, I thought your room was mine and accidentally walked in on you."

"Oh." He'd been in her room and she hadn't sensed it? Damn, what rotten luck. "At least I wasn't naked," she teased lightly.

He smiled wolfishly. "More's the pity."

He stayed near the door as she searched for the key to the wine cellar. She finally found it in a stack of papers on her desk and held it up triumphantly. "Found it." She started back toward him, but then remembered the smoke on her breath. "Wait just a moment. I've got to brush my teeth."

She tossed him the key and headed to the bathroom. He followed at a leisurely pace and she saw his reflection in the mirror. He caught her eye and shook his head sorrowfully. "You worry too much about what others think."

"I do not," she mumbled, around the toothbrush in her mouth. A speck of toothpaste landed on her chin and she wiped it away with her fingers.

Scott came into the room and propped his hip on the counter beside her. She felt self-conscious brushing her teeth

in front of him, but he didn't seem to mind watching her.
"Yes, you do." His hand lightly brushed her elbow. "It would be fun to see you let your hair down once in a while."

She bent down and spit, in as ladylike a manner as she could, into the sink. "Literally or figuratively?" she asked, as she came back up and continued brushing.

"Both," he answered. He inched over and she nearly flew out of her skin when his hand came up to touch her chin. "You had a spot of paste," he explained, as his hand dropped back to his side.

"Thank you." Once again she bent down to spit. She rinsed and dried her mouth on a towel. When her lips were dry, she ran her tongue across her teeth and smiled. "All clean."

His eyes dropped to her mouth and she stilled at the flash of heat that appeared in their dark depths. Her tongue flicked out to lick the corner of her mouth and she could've sworn he groaned. She wasn't bold enough to hold his gaze. Dropping her eyes from his, she pulled her make-up case forward and rummaged around for her lipstick. She opened it and peered in the mirror as she applied it. Her eyes flicked to Scott, who was watching her with a disturbing intensity. Smiling, she held out the tube. "Want some?"

He took the tube from her hands and dropped it onto the counter. It clattered as it fell into the sink. Scott grabbed her hand and slowly pulled her forward. She sank into a dreamlike state as he lowered his head. He was going to kiss her! Scott Clause was actually about to kiss her. She leaned into the kiss, letting out a small sigh when his lips finally touched hers. He pulled away almost instantly. "I'm sorry."

She backed away from him, embarrassed by his change of mind. "I'm sorry, too."

Scott put his hands on her shoulders and tugged her toward the door. "I'm not sorry for kissing you, Alex. I'm sorry for not picking a more romantic spot."

"Oh," she muttered numbly. More romantic spot? The bathroom was fine with her. Hell, a kitchen counter would do nicely. Anything, as long as he continued to kiss her. "Where did you have in mind?"

He turned back to her, a grin playing about the edges of his lips. "I'll let you know when I find it."

* * * *

"Alex, where have you been? I've been looking everywhere for you."

Alex stepped away from Scott and hurried to her father. "I left the key to the wine cellar in my room. I had to go fetch it."

Her father's face eased gradually. "Did you get the brandy?"

Alex held up the bottle. "Of course."

"Excellent," Cliff said, as he reached for the bottle. He noticed Scott and motioned him forward. "Come along, Scott. There're some fellows I want you to meet."

Scott gave Alex an apologetic look. "Duty calls."

She waved him on. "Go ahead. I'll catch up with you later."

Scott winked at her as he went to join her father and his friends. She wanted to pinch herself just to see if the last few minutes had been a dream. She'd kissed Scott, the man she'd

fantasized about for years. Granted, it was a very brief kiss, but a kiss nonetheless. She'd not even had to resort to the mistletoe she'd planted. And, best of all, he seemed to want to kiss her some more.

Grinning like a Cheshire cat, Alex walked over to the refreshment table and stood there looking at the selection. She was too antsy to eat, but food was a diversion. Already she was counting the minutes until she talked to Scott again. She picked up a chocolate-covered strawberry and toyed with the stem. She stuck the end in her mouth as she turned back around. Even though he appeared to be in conversation with her father's friends, Scott's eyes were on her. She was struck with a mischievous idea.

Running the fruit around her lips, she teasingly bit into the strawberry. She saw his face tighten and knew that she was affecting him. She made a show of chewing, before taking another small bite. Scott's lips curved into a wicked smile as he lifted his glass of brandy and saluted her. She returned the gesture with what remained of her strawberry before popping it into her mouth.

"You're playing with fire."

Alex hastily swallowed and glanced at Tommy, who'd snuck up on her again. "Why do you say that?"

Tommy took a swig from his beer bottle and used it to motion toward Scott. "I saw your little *Nine and a Half Weeks* impression. Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"I'm not a virgin, if that's what you're asking."

Tommy laughed. "No. That's not what I meant." He patted her shoulder in a friendly manner. "Scott's had women

throwing themselves at him for years. Are you up for that sort of competition?"

Alex put her hand on her hip and tilted her head challengingly. "Are you saying I'm not woman enough to handle Scott?"

"You're definitely woman enough," Tommy said and ran his gaze over her body. "No doubt about that, but I'm not sure you're the type of girl he normally goes for."

Alex lifted an eyebrow. "And just what sort of girl does he normally go for?"

Tommy set his beer aside and draped his arm over her shoulder in a companionable manner. "The bad girl. The girl who's not afraid to be daring and make the first move."

"I can be bad."

"But can you make the first move?" Tommy asked pointedly.

Alex glanced back at Scott, whose back was turned while he talked with the mayor of the city. His tailored tuxedo jacket fit him to perfection. His dark hair just brushed the collar of his white shirt. As she watched, he stuck his hands in his pockets and made the fabric of his tuxedo stretch taut across his back. "Oh, yeah. I can definitely make the first move." But she doubted she would have to. Scott had already alluded to another kiss. All she had to do was be there and be a willing participant.

Tommy rubbed the side of his face thoughtfully. "I do believe I feel the beginnings of a wager coming on."

Alex shook her head and laughed. "No way! I'm not betting against you."

"Are you scared you'll lose?" Tommy taunted.

"Of course I'm not." Alex snuck another strawberry and bit off half. "When I make my move on Scott, I want it to be because I desire him. Not because of some silly wager."

A gleam of approval entered Tommy's eyes. "That's the spirit, Alex. I applaud your determination, misguided though it might be."

"Do you seriously think he'll turn me down?" It was an outcome Alex had never imagined. She'd been under the belief that all a woman had to do was offer herself to a man to get him in the sack.

Tommy nodded solemnly. "Scott may be a flirt, but he has morals. If he senses that you think of him as more than a friend, he won't touch you. Add to that the fact that you're Cliff's daughter and he'll be sure to turn you down."

"Then I guess I'll just have to make myself irresistible."

"You can try," Tommy said with a shrug. "But I know Scott. The last thing he'll ever do is jeopardize his career by alienating his boss."

"My father adores Scott," Alex pointed out. "He wouldn't hold our flirtation against him."

"But you're not planning a flirtation," Tommy pointed out.
"You're planning on seducing him."

"If I can."

Tommy gave her a faintly pitying look and patted her shoulder again. "Then I wish you good luck, but don't say I didn't warn you."

After Tommy walked away, Alex spent a moment in silent reflection. Would Scott turn her down because of her father?

It couldn't be true. If that were so, he wouldn't have kissed her upstairs. Tommy was just trying to scare her. He'd always been a practical joker.

Alex grabbed another strawberry before making her way to her father and his friends. She'd waited long enough. She would not allow her father to monopolize Scott for the entire evening. As she passed a waitress, she tossed the strawberry stem on a tray and straightened her shoulders. Scott noticed her first, his full lips curving into a sexy smile. Her father was the next to notice, motioning her forward hastily. "Ah, Alex! I was just telling Dale that you've decided to go into law."

Alex gave a practiced smile to her father and his good friend, Dale. She carefully kept her eyes from straying to Scott to see how he was taking the news. She'd never told him about her desire to go into law, so he was bound to be surprised. "I've been accepted to Yale Law."

"Yale?" her father's friend echoed. "That is stupendous news. When do you leave?"

"In May," Alex answered. "It'll give me time to get used to the city before school starts." She finally spared a glance at Scott to see that his gaze was on her face. His dark eyes were impassive, his face neutral. Would he even miss her when she was gone?

"Excellent," Dale said, and lifted his glass. "A toast to Alexandra's success."

A glass was offered to Alex. She accepted it and lifted it to her lips. As she sipped, she glanced toward Scott, who had lifted his glass for the toast. He drained it in one swallow, plopped the glass on the table behind him, then turned and

strode away. Alex watched him go with a puzzled frown. What was the matter with him? Her father noticed Scott's abrupt departure also. He touched her arm and drew her aside. "Darling, why don't you go check on Scott? He is not himself tonight."

Alex had a hunch about the reason for his bad mood. She set aside her own glass and slipped through the crowd, heading in the direction she'd last seen Scott. She exited the ballroom and came to a sudden stop.

Scott was lounging against the opposite wall with his arms crossed across his broad chest. "When were you going to tell me?"

She wet her lips nervously. "I'm not sure."

He pushed away from the wall and advanced on her. "I thought we were friends, Alex. You shouldn't be afraid to tell me things."

"I wasn't afraid," she protested. "I wanted it to be a surprise." *I wanted you to be proud of me*, she silently added. She was sick and tired of being known as Cliff Barrett's daughter. She was ready to make a name for herself, even if it was by following in the footsteps of her powerful father.

Scott was in front of her now, his wide shoulders casting a shadow across her face. A lock of dark brown hair fell across his forehead as he bent closer. "Well, I was surprised." His hand touched the side of her face and then slid down to cup her neck. "You seem to be full of surprises tonight."

With a harsh groan, Scott pulled her forward, his lips coming down on hers in a hard, demanding kiss. She grabbed his lapels and pulled him closer, both of them sinking against

the wall, their bodies almost melding into one. She'd been kissed a few times, but none of the other men had affected her the way Scott did. Simply being near him made her short of breath. When he touched her, as he did now, she felt like she could spontaneously combust.

"Alex," Scott whispered near her lips, as his mouth trailed across her neck. "What am I going to do without you here?"

She smiled against his shoulder, but it was bittersweet. He would miss her, but it would be nothing compared to the pain she would feel at leaving him in Montgomery. "Spend more time with Tommy?" she joked.

He pulled away and gave her a direct look. "Why did you pick Yale?"

She grew uncomfortable under his regard. She turned her gaze to the floor. "Because it's one of the best law schools in the country."

Scott tilted her head up with one finger under her chin. His dark eyes smoldered. "Your father went to Harvard."

Alex shrugged. "So?"

Scott's expression turned pitying. "I'm sure it's not easy being Cliff's daughter, but is this some latent form of rebellion?"

"Of course not," Alex answered. "I got accepted to Yale. No ulterior motive was involved."

Scott didn't look convinced, but there was no way Alex was going to admit she was attending Yale because it was his alma mater. She'd been accepted to Harvard and a dozen other schools, but Yale had been her first choice. Others

would say she was following in her father's footsteps, but she knew the truth. She wanted to follow Scott.

His lips returned to her neck, and she shivered as his teeth lightly scraped her skin. "What kind of law do you want to study?" As he spoke, his stubble tickled her shoulder.

"Criminal," she promptly answered.

Scott's mouth moved the hollow formed by her collarbone. "You're too sweet to be a criminal attorney."

"No, I'm not," Alex argued. "I can be bad when I want to be."

Scott lifted his head and grinned at her. "Prove it."

She knew he was teasing, but it was the opening she'd been waiting for. Without stopping to ponder the ramifications of her actions, she took his hand and led him to the stairs.

He didn't resist, but he did ask a question. "Where are we going?"

She paused with one foot on the step and tossed a look over her shoulder. "My room."

He looked shocked for a brief moment. "Why?" "So I can show you just how bad I can be."

* * * *

As they climbed the stairs, Alex's mind danced like the twinkling lights she'd strung around the banister. The flashing colors and festive atmosphere were lost on her though. All she could think about was the man beside her, the man she was currently taking to her room. She'd never brought a man home, much less taken one to her room. It was a new

experience and one she planned to savor for the rest of her days.

"Alex," Scott said with a whisper of a touch against her back. "What's gotten into you?"

The slide of silk against her spine, combined with his touch, sent a jolt of longing through her veins. "What do you mean?"

His hand dropped lower, caressing the skin bared by the low back of her dress. "The fact that you're trying to seduce me, for starters."

She leaned into his touch, welcoming the pleasant feeling of his hands on her bare skin. "Am I succeeding?" Her voice was husky, nearly an octave lower than usual.

"What do you think?" he asked with a soft chuckle, as his hands dropped another inch. When his fingers curved against her ass, she knew she had her answer.

At the top of the stairs, she turned and plastered herself against him. Unmindful of the guests who might stumble upon them, she pressed a wet, open-mouthed kiss against his lips. Her tongue teasingly flicked against the corner of his mouth. Subtly maneuvering his head, Scott took control of the kiss. Just when her knees were turning to jelly and her thighs trembling, he broke it off. He grinned crookedly and her heart flip-flopped inside her chest. "I thought we were going to your room?"

"We are," she answered. Wrapping her hand around his neck, she pulled him down for another kiss. "In a minute."

The minute lengthened until they were making out hot and heavy on the first floor landing. Their breaths mingled, hers

spicy from the Bloody Marys, and his tinged with the sweet taste of brandy. She felt a prod of his dick against her thigh and rejoiced in the fact that she'd finally made Scott notice her. And judging from the size of his bulge, his interest had definitely been piqued. She slid her hand down his chest and cupped him. "Minute's up."

"Among other things," Scott said dryly.

They made their way to her room, only stopping once or twice to exchange heated kisses. She kicked off her heels as soon as they entered her room and quickly shed her dress. Clad in her bra and panties, she impatiently waited for Scott to remove his bow tie.

"Are you deliberately knotting it?" she asked.

His fingers stilled. "No. My damn hands won't work." His gaze swept over her, finally noticing that she was nearly nude. "*Damn*, Alex! You've been hiding under too much clothing."

She preened under his gaze. The torturous work-outs she'd put herself through since college seemed to be paying off. "So have you." She helped him undo his tie and teasingly slid it from around his neck. She tossed it aside and went to work on his jacket. As it fell to the floor, she ran her hands over his broad shoulders. He was so strong and sexy; she nearly came just from touching him.

His hands cupped her breasts through the lace and silk of her bra. As his thumbs raked across her nipples, she felt them stiffening into hard peaks. He hooked his fingers into the cups and pulled them down, exposing her to his gaze. "I've dreamed of this," he said, a moment before his head

lowered. At the first swipe of his tongue against her nipples, she felt her knees weaken.

Good Lord, if he could make her this hot just from kissing her breasts, imagine what it would be like once he was inside her. She clasped her hands around his head as his tongue traced an invisible line from one nipple to the other. He used his teeth to lightly scrape her skin. She let out a breathy moan.

Scott lifted his head, his eyes glazed with desire. "More?" She nodded. "More."

He went back to work on her breasts while his hands slid to the waistband of the tiny thong panties she was wearing. His fingers slipped past the elastic band and touched the top of her mound.

"Your skin is so smooth."

Her face flamed. "I just had a bikini wax."

Scott seemed intrigued by the feel of no hair. "I like it."

She arched against him, bringing his fingers closer to the spot in which she desired him the most. He parted the folds of her sex as his thumb unerringly found her most sensitive spot. Dots swam before her eyes as waves of pleasure crashed over her. It had never been like this with anyone else. Never.

"You're wet for me."

She widened her legs in a silent invitation for him to continue. "Does that surprise you?" Her last word trailed into a gasp as first one finger, then another stretched the walls of her pussy.

"A little," he admitted.

"Why is that?" She felt dampness seeping across his fingers and soaking the cotton lining of her thong. She should be embarrassed, but all she could think about was how good it felt.

"I never imagined you would be so responsive."

She was amused by his words. "Do I take that to mean you've tried to imagine me having sex?"

His hips nudged hers and she felt his dick pressing against her thigh. "Many times. But the reality far surpasses anything I ever could've imagined." He pulled her closer, his fingers moving even deeper. "I want you, Alex."

The sound of her name on his lips caused her to begin convulsing in climax. She shuddered and moaned his name as tremors wracked her body. She rested her head against his shoulder and panted for air. She'd never before come just from somebody fingering her. Tonight truly would be a night of firsts for her.

When she caught her breath, she reached immediately for the buttons on Scott's shirt. She wanted him naked, and she wanted him now.

"Miss Alexandra?"

Both of them stiffened at the sound of the caterer's voice coming over the intercom speaker positioned on the wall behind them. Scott's fingers still rested inside her pussy. As he pulled them out, the rasp of his skin against her swollen clit nearly made her come all over again.

"Don't answer her," he whispered, as he placed a fleeting kiss across her forehead.

Alex bit her lip indecisively. There was nothing she wanted more than to stay with Scott, but she'd never been one to ignore her responsibilities. She was in charge of the party and her father's guests came first.

Breaking away from him, she pushed the button on the intercom with a shaky hand. "Yes, Martha?"

"We're nearly out of champagne. Would you like one of the servers to go buy more?"

Alex lifted her wrist and peered at the delicate gold watch her father had given her last Christmas. "It's nearly ten. The stores will be closed." Her father kept the wine cellar stocked, but which bottles would be the best? Alex was hopeless when it came to choosing wines, but she could try. "I'll go downstairs and pick something out."

"Thank you," Martha answered and clicked off.

Alex sighed and turned around to face Scott. "I'm sorry. I have to go."

Scott looked undeniably sexy with his mussed hair and wrinkled shirt. The top two buttons of his shirt were undone, allowing a tiny peek of tanned skin. She bent to pick up her dress and, as she rose, she cast a longing glance toward his crotch. He was still aroused, the hard length of him pressing against the front of his pants. She briefly thought about undoing his zipper and freeing his cock. She imagined wrapping her hands around his hard length, but there was not enough time.

She slid the dress over her head and smoothed it as best she could. She probably looked a mess. Her hair was beginning to fall. Her panties stuck to her damply. At least

she could do something about the latter. She reached under her dress and pulled off the thong. She tossed it into the hamper and straightened her bra before turning toward the door.

"Are you coming?" she asked.

Scott grimaced and adjusted the front of his pants. "Not yet."

She gave him a sensual look. "You will. I promise you."

He picked up his jacket and tossed it over his shoulder. As they strolled out of the room, Alex was embarrassingly aware that anyone who saw them would know just what they'd been doing. She touched her lips with her tongue and knew they were swollen from his kisses. Her knees were still shaky and her pussy on fire from his touch.

They bypassed the main hallway and took a shortcut through the kitchen. The wine cellar was located in the rear of the house and accessible only by a set of stairs that had once been used as part of the Underground Railroad. The old wood creaked as they descended into the poorly lit cellar. Alex had told her father time and again that he needed to remodel this part of the house, but he'd refused because of its historical significance.

As soon as they were in the damp coolness of the room, Alex heard the rasp of a lighter a second before the smell of tobacco filled the air. She gave Scott a vaguely admonishing look. "My father doesn't allow people to smoke in here."

Scott's eyes gleamed in the semi-darkness as he took a long drag from his cigarette. He released the smoke with a grin. "Do you only do what your father allows?"

Up until tonight, the answer would've been yes. Alex had always done what was expected of her. She'd waited until sixteen to start dating, didn't lose her virginity until college, and never had a single one-night stand. Her father was a jovial man, but he was a stickler for appearances. As a child, Alex was taught to be perfectly behaved at all times. Now she was tired of being the good girl, and it was time she showed it.

Reaching out, she plucked the cigarette from his hand and took a deep drag. She threw her head back and released a perfect smoke ring into the air. The second ring she was made was just a tad crooked, but the third was much better.

"Enviable talent," Scott remarked as he reached for his cigarette. "You'll have to teach me how to do it sometime."

She clutched her heart and feigned shock. "What? The multi-talented Scott Clause is admitting that he cannot do something?"

"Smart ass," Scott said, and ruffled her hair as he passed by. He stood examining the shelves, his hands planted on his lean hips and his feet braced slightly apart.

Alex watched him, wondering what he would do if she snuck up behind him. Her gaze jerked from his ass to his face when he suddenly turned and caught her looking at him.

"Which bottles should we take?" he asked.

She shrugged as she moved to stand by his side. She peered at the labels, only recognizing a couple of the brands. She gestured to a bottle of what she thought was white wine. "That one looks good."

Scott slid out the bottle and chuckled. "This is moonshine."

"Are you serious?" Alex leaned forward and stared at the label. "Where did my father get it?"

Scott had returned the bottle to the shelf and was counting the number of similar bottles. "Fifteen bottles. They all look pretty old. My guess is your ancestors did a little trafficking during Prohibition."

Alex's eyes lit up. It was good to learn that her family had not always been as stuffy as they were now. "Do you want to try some?"

Scott whistled low under his breath. "You're treading dangerous ground, aren't you Alex?"

She reached past him and pulled out a bottle. She uncorked it and raised it to her mouth. Before she swallowed, she caught a whiff of the moonshine. It smelled like straight rubbing alcohol, but it was too late to back out now. She swallowed a mouthful, gasping when it robbed her of all breath. She passed the bottle to Scott with one hand, while the other rose to cover her tingling lips.

"How is it?" he asked, with a wicked look in his eyes.

"Excellent," she lied. The alcohol was already burning a path to her stomach. She'd stick with her Bloody Marys from now on.

The muscles in Scott's throat worked as he took a swallow. When he was finished, he smacked his lips, and re-corked the bottle. "That's not too bad." He held the bottle out to her. "Want some more?"

"No," she said and waved her hand impatiently. "We don't have time."

Scott's lips curved into a knowing smile. "Chicken."

"Oh, very mature," she said, with a roll of her eyes. "I'm still on a mission here. We've got to find champagne and take it upstairs, remember?"

She turned her back on him and continued to scan the shelves. She was on her tiptoes, reaching for a bottle, when she felt his hand slide across her hips. His hair tickled her shoulder as he bent to whisper in her ear.

"The thought of you without panties is turning me on."

A jolt of heat went straight to her still damp sex. She clutched the edge of the shelf to keep from falling. He brushed her hair away from her ear and delicately nipped her earlobe. His hand slid across her belly and lower to cup her mound. "Spread your legs."

Even though she knew they didn't have time to fool around, she complied. His hand remained outside her dress, his fingers using the silk to rub her throbbing clit. "You're gonna have a stain," he warned.

"I don't care," she panted. She wouldn't care if Versace himself had made the dress. Her body, so recently brought to climax, was already screaming for release again.

Scott changed the angle of his hand. This time, she could feel his fingers, covered with silk, slip the tiniest bit inside her. "God, I want to fuck you," he grunted against her neck.

"Then do it," Alex said and shimmled her hips against his hand.

"Not here," Scott said. "When you and I have sex, I want it to be done right." He licked the side of her neck and gently bit her earlobe. She felt the press of his chest against her back as he leaned past her and grabbed a bottle.

"What are you doing?" she asked as he grabbed a corkscrew from the shelf and uncorked the bottle.

"Shush," Scott said. His hands stayed in front of her as he dipped his fingers into the wine and brought it to her lips. "Drink."

Her tongue flickered against his fingers, tasting a mixture of the wine and her own juices. He dipped his fingers again, but this time he made a damp trail on the side of her neck. She felt his mouth sucking her skin as he laved every last drop from her skin. Tipping the bottle, he dribbled the tiniest bit of liquid into her cleavage. "Oops," he said with a soft chuckle. He turned her around and buried his head against her breasts.

As he sucked, he brought the bottle up and teasingly rolled it across her breasts. The shock of the cold bottle against her nipple had it stiffening into a hard peak. He tilted the bottle again, but this time the wine slipped between her cleavage and streamed down her stomach. A dark stain appeared on her dress, clearly outlining the path the wine had taken. Scott pulled away and smiled with satisfaction to see that the trail ended at the juncture of her thighs. "I've gotten you all wet."

"Yes, you have," Alex admitted. Her fingers curved into the shelf, the moldings biting into her palm. "What are you going to do about it?"

Scott's dark eyes raked across her face. "First thing I'll do is get you all cleaned up."

She felt cool air across her thighs as his hands lifted her dress to her waist. Her sex, already wet, was made more so by the wine she'd felt coursing across her naked pussy. Scott

kept his hands on her hips with the dress caught in his fingers as he bent to his knees in front of her. Anticipating what he was about to do, Alex lifted one slim foot and placed it on his shoulder. Scott glanced up at her with approval. "Impatient?"

"Yes." She turned her knee out, opening herself even further to his gaze. He stared at the dewy lips of her sex, where her need and the wine made her glisten.

Scott's hair brushed her thigh as he made the first swipe of his tongue against the top of her mound. She felt him licking the wine from her skin as he'd promised, but she was desperate to feel his mouth against her pussy. His tongue moved into the crease of her thigh and she nearly screamed with frustration. Why was he taking his time getting to where she needed him most? She was already so wound up, she doubted it would take more than a minute for her to climax. But still he ignored that part of her.

With one final swipe of his tongue, Scott got to his feet. She sank back against the shelf and gave him a disbelieving look. "Is that it?"

He grinned wolfishly. "The wine is all gone."

Hell, if wine was all that was stopping him, she gladly pour it on herself. She was seriously thinking about doing just that before he spoke.

"These should do." He pulled several champagne bottles from the highest rack and gave her a couple to carry. "We can drop them off in the kitchen."

The lust raging in Alex's veins slowly abated. Dear Lord, if she looked bad before, she was ten times worse now. Her dress was ruined, her hair beyond hopeless, and she doubted

she could walk in a straight line if asked. She stuck close to Scott's back, intent on staying hidden from view.

They snuck into the kitchen, dropped off the bottles, and disappeared before anyone could comment. Racing up the stairs, Alex was the first to reach her door. She collapsed against the wall, laughing and gasping for breath. "I was so sure we were going to get caught."

Scott, who was not even winded, leaned against his own door. "We should get back to the party before your father misses us."

Alex glanced down at her dress with a skeptical look. "I don't think that's possible."

"Sure it is. We'll just tell him you spilled a Bloody Mary on your dress. He'll never suspect a thing."

Her dress wasn't the reason she meant. Alex doubted she could stay in the crowded ballroom without finally giving into temptation and jumping Scott. She pushed away from the door and slowly advanced on him. "You can *not* be serious. You get me all hot and bothered and you're just going to leave me?"

"Patience is supposed to be a virtue," he guipped.

She leaned against him and lifted her lips for a kiss. "I've never much cared about being virtuous."

His head, which had already began lowering, jerked up. She watched in disappointment as the lust in his eyes disappeared and was replaced with wary confusion. "Yes, you do."

She gripped the front of his shirt and pulled him closer. "Why are you being such a party pooper?"

He dropped his chin so he could look her in the eyes. "Why are you acting like the life of the party? It's not your style."

"How do you know what my style is like?"

"I've known you for four years, Alex. You're not that hard to figure out."

She pushed away from him with a disgusted grunt. Why did everyone presume to know her? They had no clue how she longed to be the bad girl. If Santa made a list based on thoughts alone, she would've missed several visits by now. Walking backwards, she came up against her door. With a blinding flash, she realized what she wanted to do. Before she left for Yale, she would let everyone in Montgomery, Alabama know that she was not the naïve, innocent girl they believed her to be. And tonight would be the perfect night to prove her point.

* * * *

Scott escaped into his room before Alex could throw herself at him again. He'd barely resisted the urge to fuck her right there in the hall where her father could easily see them. His hands visibly shook as he slammed the door shut. What had gotten into Alex?

For four years, she'd acted like a scared virgin around him. Now, all of a sudden, she was looking at him with the eyes of a temptress and beckoning him to do the unthinkable. He'd never thought her unattractive, but tonight something about Alex drew him like a moth to a flame. Even now, his dick pressed against the front of his pants, begging for release.

Twice he'd brought her to orgasm while he had yet to do more than experience a bit of pre-cum.

He'd seen the way she'd looked at his crotch, like she wanted to taste him. The thought of his dick in Alex's soft, warm mouth had him groaning loudly. If he didn't stop thinking of her, he'd never be able to return downstairs. He'd recently been made partner and it would not do to offend Cliff by debauching his daughter.

A glance in the mirror assured him that he looked as bad as he felt. His hair was rumpled, his suit wrinkled beyond repair, and his shoes covered with dust from the wine cellar. Instead of fixing the damage, he decided to start from scratch. He undressed and put on a clean suit. The shirt he removed was stained with the wine he'd poured over Alex's delectable body. Before he tossed it aside, he lifted it to his nose and inhaled the fragrance he would always associate with her.

Get a grip, Clause. He shook the lust from his mind. It might be Christmas, but he was still at his boss's house. Everyone knew Cliff's parties got a little out of hand, but the lawyers were always expected to act professional. In no way had he been acting professional when he had his hands all over Cliff's daughter.

Downstairs, the party was in full swing. Several of the guests had moved to the library where a karaoke system was set up. Scott paused to listen to Tommy's wife demolishing a popular disco number. He only stood there for a moment, but it was long enough for Carly to notice him and flash him a seductive look. Scott turned away in disgust. Tommy's taste

in women always ran toward the slutty types. Earlier, when Scott danced with her, Carly propositioned him no less than six times. She'd even rubbed her crotch against his fly, hoping to tempt him into conducting an affair.

Scott wanted none of it. He chose his sexual partners with great care. He never slept with someone who would fall in love or someone who was already involved in a relationship. His methods ensured that no one got hurt when their liaison ended.

The thought drew him up short. What about Alex? It was no secret that she admired him, but did her interest in him stem from more than just a desire to sleep with him? Alex was a nice girl, but he wasn't ready to settle down. He still had his career ahead of him and marriage was years down the road.

Marriage! Good God, he'd better lay off the alcohol for a while if he was thinking of marriage and Alex at the same time. She'd make someone an excellent wife, of course, but it wouldn't be him. He cherished their friendship, but a relationship between them would never work. Except in the bedroom. Scott had no doubts that if he ever fucked Alex, it would be a mind-blowing experience.

As if his private thoughts had conjured her, he felt her presence beside him. He turned away from Carly, who still mangled her song selection, and feasted on the sight of Alex in tight jeans and a red cardigan with the top two buttons undone. He scowled and took a second look. "Alex, I think you forgot something."

She glanced down at her body and shook her head. "No, I didn't."

"Yes, you did." His eyes locked on the sight of her pert breasts. "Where's your bra?"

She cocked her head to one side and gave him a look of mock innocence. "How do you know I'm not wearing one?"

He gulped. "Because I can see your nipples." And they were hard. The sight of her nipples pressing against the soft cotton of her blouse had his dick springing to attention all over again.

"Can you?" She shrugged. "Don't look, if it bothers you."

"I didn't say it bothered me." Scott jerked his eyes back to her face. "Are you drunk?"

Her green eyes looked overly bright, but she didn't appear to be drunk. She slanted a smile at him before turning and strolling into the library. He watched the sway of her hips encased in tight denim as she walked toward the DJ running the karaoke machine. She whispered into the ear of the dumbstruck man before returning to Scott's side. "I've got a surprise for you."

"You do?" Scott's palms felt sweaty. He rubbed them against his jacket. "What is it?"

She smiled again and shook her head. "If I told you, it wouldn't be a surprise." She slid her hand through his and tugged him into the library. "Come on. Let's listen to the singing."

Scott could think of a thousand things he'd rather do, but he allowed her to tug him to the front of the room. They took a seat next to Tommy and his wife, but Scott was careful to

make sure that he was not seated beside Carly. The brazen woman would probably try to slide a hand up his thigh.

As they sat there, he was aware of Alex. Her leg was pressed against his and every time she breathed, his eyes dropped to her chest. Her breasts were perfect. Pert, full, and just begging to be tasted again.

"You're staring," Alex laughed into his ear.

"You should be wearing a bra," he whispered back.

"Does it bother you?"

"Hell, yes, it bothers me. I don't want other men..." his mouth snapped shut when he realized what he was about to say. He didn't want other men looking at her. Jealousy was not something he normally felt, but Alex was making him display it for the first time in his life.

She patted his leg. "Nobody's paying any attention to me."

Scott glanced around the room and was surprised to see she was right. Usually Alex faded into the background at her father's parties. Everyone liked her, but she had a tendency to be overlooked because of her quiet demeanor and plain clothes. But tonight was different. Tonight she was dressed in jeans that fit her like a second skin. She was positively oozing sex appeal. Scott studied the delicate line of her jaw and lush curve of her lips. How come he'd never noticed that she had beautiful lips? He thought about those lips encircling the head of his dick and he had to shift in his chair.

"Nervous?" Alex asked.

"No. Should I be?"

She chuckled and the soft sound teased him like a lover's caress. "Just a little."

"Alex, what have you done?"

Scott heard a commotion start in the room and belatedly realized that everyone was looking at him. What the hell? He took another look and realized he was being called to the front of the room. His jaw dropped. "Please tell me you didn't do what I think you did."

Alex gently shoved his shoulder. "They're calling you."

Scott shook his head. "No way in hell, Alex. I am *not* singing."

She crossed her arms and gave him an amused smile. "Scared?"

Scott's eyes narrowed. She knew just what buttons to push, didn't she? Well, this time he would show her.

"If I'm going, so are you." He grabbed her arm and tugged her toward the front of the room. He grabbed a mic and thrust the second one at Alex. "What are we singing?"

Her grin widened even further. "It's a surprise."

Scott heard the opening chords of the song and felt a sick sensation in his stomach. "You Ain't Woman Enough To Take My Man? Alex, are you out of your mind? That's a chick song."

Alex winked at him and lifted the mic to her mouth. He watched in surprise as she opened her lips and began singing. Either he was mistaken or she was looking straight at Carly as she sang. Scott silently applauded her ingenuity. Her ploy seemed to work because, soon after Alex began singing, Carly left in a huff.

The song ended and the entire room exploded into applause. Scott saw the envious looks he was receiving from

the males in the room and knew Alex had finally made an impression on them. She was no longer Cliff's daughter in their eyes. She was now a total hottie.

"Come along, Loretta. Take your bow and let's get out of here."

Alex waved to the crowd, not resisting as he towed her out of the room and toward the semi-privacy her father's office offered. Once the door was shut behind them, he turned toward her.

"What's going on?"

She brushed past him and sat on the edge of her father's desk. Her legs fell open in invitation. "What do you mean?"

His hands fluttered toward her clothing and provocative position. "You're acting like a..."

"-slut?" she finished for him.

No, not a slut. Never that. He came toward her, stopping a couple of feet away. Her eyes watched him carefully as he tried to think of a response. "Alex, I don't know what's going on in your mind."

"And that bothers you?"

He nodded. "Of course it does. I don't like not knowing what you're thinking."

She slid off the desk and gently pushed him into a chair. He fell into it without protest. Kneeling in front of the chair, she said, "Sometimes you think too much, Clause." She trapped him with her hands on the arms of the chair. "Just relax."

Relax? He scoffed at the notion. How was he to relax when Alex's breasts were pressing against his knees? Her mouth

was just within reach and the heat from her body seared him. She teasingly undid the third button on her cardigan and he audibly gulped. "Your father..."

"Is drinking with his old frat buddies. He won't miss us." Alex's fingers moved to the fourth button until only three remained. "Why are you being so noble?"

Unable to resist, he cupped the soft weight of a breast in his hand. Her nipple pushed against his palm, proving she still wanted him. He tugged her cardigan open and bared her breasts to his gaze. He ran his thumb across the tip and shifted in his chair. "I'm not feeling particularly noble at the moment."

Alex slapped his hand away; then pushed his legs apart and knelt between them. "What are you feeling then?"

Horny. He was feeling horny as hell.

She unzipped his pants and reached inside to cup his balls. "What? No answer?"

He had an answer and a damned good one, but with her hands down his pants he could barely think straight, much less speak.

"Have you realized that we are under the mistletoe?"

Scott looked up and finally noticed the green vine tacked to the wall above his head. "Why would Cliff put mistletoe in his office?"

Alex's hand slid up the shaft of his dick teasingly. "He didn't. I did."

"Why?" Scott's breath escaped in a rush as she began to stroke him

Alex pulled her hands away and sat back on her heels. "Why do you think? I wanted to tempt you into kissing me."

"And you thought mistletoe would do the trick? All you had to do was ask."

For the first time that evening, Alex looked unsure of herself. "Would you've kissed me?"

Would he? Probably, but he would have blamed it on the mistletoe. Looking at her now, he knew such a ploy would never be necessary again. Kissing Alex had turned out to be the highlight of his entire year. Possibly even his whole life.

He tried a diversion. "I've already kissed you."

"Yes, you have." Her hands went back inside his pants. "And now it's my turn to kiss you."

She pulled his dick through his fly, and began to lower her head. Then she did what he'd been imagining all night. "Thank God for mistletoe," he muttered, as her lips encircled the head of his dick. He felt her smile against his skin and his heart felt curiously light. What was wrong with him? He was getting a blowjob in his boss's office, performed by said boss's daughter, and he wasn't even trying to put up a fight. If Cliff walked in, no doubt Scott would lose his job, but getting fired didn't seem to matter.

He felt the brush of Alex's hair against his belly and let out a moan. Her tongue moved the length of his dick and back before she gently began to suck. God, he was going to come in the mouth of his boss's daughter!

"Alex," he tugged on her hair, trying to alert her to the fact that he was about to climax. She made another swipe with her tongue as he moaned, then poured himself out into her

mouth. Unlike the other girls who'd blown him in the past, Alex did not seem disgusted to have him come in her mouth. With a satisfied smile, she sat back and calmly tucked him back into his pants.

"Merry Christmas," she said with an impish grin.

If that was her gift to him, then it was the best he'd ever received.

* * * *

Alex had never given a blow job, but judging from Scott's reaction, she'd not done too shabbily. They still hadn't had sex, but they had all night. In fact, he was spending the weekend with them. She was certain they would sleep together before the weekend was over.

She got to her feet and rebuttoned her cardigan. Tossing her hair over one shoulder, she motioned toward the door. "Come find me when you've recovered."

She rejoiced in his surprised expression as she calmly walked out and shut the door behind her. Only then, did she allow her body to sink against the door. She'd actually succeeded in shocking Scott. She'd been scared once he got his rocks off that he would come to his senses and not desire her anymore. Instead, his eyes had grown even darker with desire. Had she not left when she had, they would probably be having sex right that moment. She was tempted to go back and finish what she'd started, but she knew that the best comes to those who wait.

She pushed her hair over her shoulders and strolled toward the ballroom. Heads turned as she passed. Several

openly stared, while others seemed to not recognize her. She looked out of place in her jeans and casual clothing at a formal party, but she hadn't thought it would cause quite such a stir.

She was almost to the front of the room when her father noticed her. He did a double take, his brows drawing close together in the center of his forehead, before he excused himself from his friends and hurried over to her. "Alex. What happened?"

"Nothing happened," she answered breezily.

"Then why are you wearing jeans?"

Alex glanced down at her outfit. "I wanted to change into something comfortable."

"Comfortable?" Cliff took her arm and led her to a corner. "Alex, honey, this is a party."

Alex gave him a serious look. "This is my home," she reminded him. "I should be able to wear what I want."

Cliff sighed. "Just go put your pretty dress back on. It's almost time to light the Christmas tree outside."

Alex tugged her arm from his grip. "I can't put my dress on. It's ruined." She wouldn't say by what. Her father didn't need to know what activities she'd been up to while wearing that particular garment.

Luckily her father didn't ask. "Just go put on something a little more dressy then. I'll need your help with the tree at midnight."

Alex glanced at her watch. It was nearly eleven. She had time to change, but there was nothing in her closet. *Except for ...* Alex smiled to herself. It would be perfect!

Hiding her enthusiasm, she gave her father a quick nod. "I'll go change and meet you by the tree."

As she left the ballroom, she caught Scott's eye. He'd just entered and was standing near Tommy. She gave him a flirty wave before disappearing through the door.

In her room, standing in front of her closet, doubts began to assail her. Did she have the nerve to appear in public wearing what she'd planned? It had been six years since she'd worn it to a college frat party. She'd been twenty and rejoicing in her newfound freedom at LSU. Now she was twenty-six, but she could once again use it to celebrate the beginning of her new life.

Stripping off her jeans and cardigan, she surveyed her body in the mirror. She could go without a bra and panties, but the dress would look so much better with a push-up. Plus, it would be fun to have Scott strip them off her. After finding appropriately sexy lingerie, she took a deep breath and slid the dress over her head, smoothing the wrinkles from the velvet fabric.

The dress was black and ended at the top of her thighs. The neckline was low and showed a hint of her lacy bra. In college, she paired it with thigh high boots and a velvet choker, but her father would kill her if she took it that far. Instead she put on black heels and no jewelry. She left her hair down. One spray of perfume and she was ready to go.

When she reached the bottom of the stairs, it was to the sound of silence. The ballroom was empty, so everyone must've already gone outside for the annual lighting of the tree. She didn't have time to search for her coat, so she

rushed out the door and across the lawn to where the guests were gathered in front of the duck pond.

Thankfully, it was not a cold night.

"There she is!" she heard her father say as she hurried to his side. "Just in time."

Slightly out of breath, Alex accepted the star he handed her and glanced up at the ladder propped beside the eight foot tall tree. Since she'd been eight years old, it was her duty to put the star on the top. She was too old to do so now, but she didn't have the heart to tell her father. He got so excited by the Season that he wouldn't understand her being less than enthusiastic about their family's tradition.

"Scott!" Cliff motioned him forward with a hand. "Hold the ladder steady for Alex."

Alex paused with one foot on the bottom rung. She'd just realized something. With such a short skirt and wearing a thong, if Scott looked up he would be able to see pretty much all of her. In fact, if the wind decided to blow, the entire crowd might just get a glimpse of her bare ass.

Noticing her indecision, Scott took a step closer and wrapped his hands around the ladder. Her back was pressed against his chest and she instinctively curled against his warmth even though she wasn't cold. "What's the matter?" he asked into her ear.

"My dress is kinda short."

His eyes roved down her body, leaving trails of fire in their wake. "I noticed. Looks good."

If she wasn't so worried about flashing the crowd, she might've been pleased. As it was, she felt like she wanted to throw up. "I can't climb a ladder like this."

Scott shrugged. "Then don't. Let someone else."

"You don't understand. My father lives for this stuff. He'll be upset if I don't play along with tradition."

"I've got an idea." Scott slipped off his coat and handed it to her. For the benefit of the crowd, he began to speak in a loud voice. "You look cold."

"Thank you," Alex whispered, as she slipped into his coat. The hem fell just above her knees, so she should be able to maintain her modesty. She turned back to the ladder and took another breath. "Just one more thing," she whispered to Scott.

"What?"

"I'm afraid of heights."

"For the love of God," Scott groaned. "Just let me put the damn star on the tree."

"No, I've done it the past seventeen years. I can do it again." She began to climb, keeping a tight grip on the star and the ladder. Her heels made it treacherous, but she was able to plop the star on top and scurry back down. She was still a couple of feet from the bottom when strong hands wrapped around her waist and lifted her bodily from the ladder. When her feet didn't touch ground, she realized he had no intention of putting her down.

"Scott? Where are we going?"

He didn't answer. She twisted around and glanced at his face. "Scott. Put me down."

"Not yet." He tightened his grip and continued strolling across the lawn as if he didn't have a care in the world.

She looked over his shoulder. "People are staring at us." "Let them."

"My father also."

He didn't even stumble. "I'm getting you out of here since this party is obviously the last place you want to be."

"True, but where are we going?"

"My place."

That shut her up. It was well known around Barrett and Associates that Scott was a private person. He normally did not take women to his house. "My father won't like me leaving."

"I think it's time you finally did something you want to do."

His words echoed her very own thoughts. It was time for her to do something different. It was up to Scott to determine exactly how different this Christmas would be for her.

* * * *

"This is cheating!"

Scott stopped piling bags of pre-popped popcorn into a buggy and gave Alex an amused look. "No, it's not. This is how my family always did it."

Alex stared at the mound of popcorn with dismay. "We'll never be able to string all this!"

Scott dropped a final bag into the buggy and pushed it farther down the aisle. "Then we won't. There's no rule that says you have to finish everything you start, Alex."

In her house, there was.

She hurried to keep up with him as he swung the buggy toward the next aisle. "Do you even own a tree?"

He stopped walking so quickly that she collided into his back. She tottered on her heels and grabbed the buggy to keep from toppling over. "As a matter of fact, I do have a tree."

"Good, because I would hate to think I've got to string all these popcorn for a non-existent tree."

"You need to learn to relax and have a good time," Scott ordered. "Don't worry so much."

"I don't worry," she snapped back. "I'm just cautious."

He leaned in close and gave her a quick peck on the lips.

"For the rest of this weekend, throw caution to the wind."

He and the buggy took off again. She threw up her hands and rushed after him.

Next they stopped to pick up needles and red thread. She laughed at Scott's bemused look and reached past him to select the proper type of needle. "This is what you need. See, my family's traditions come in handy sometimes."

"Ah," Scott laughed and held up a hand. "But I bet the Clauses have one tradition that none of you Barretts can top."

"And what is that?"

Scott twirled the buggy around and headed toward the refrigerated section. He waved his hand in a dramatic fashion. "Ta da!"

Alex gaped at his selection. "Jello? What in the world does Jello have to do with Christmas."

Scott held up a package. "It's red and green, isn't it?" He tossed several boxes of the pre-made cups into the buggy.

"Yes, but..."

Scott held up a hand. "No buts. I promise you'll enjoy it." He tossed a few more packages into the buggy and proceeded to the check-out line. Since it was only two days until Christmas, the lines were extremely backed up. They amused themselves by reading the covers of the gossip rags and imagining what everyone in line was getting from Santa.

"See that lady in the pink hat?"

Alex stood on her tiptoes and peered at a lady two lines over. "Yes. What about her?"

"I bet she's getting a vibrator."

Alex slapped a hand over her mouth to cover a short burst of horrified laughter. "You're terrible," she admonished.

"For her tired feet," Scott continued with a trace of a smirk. "What did you think I was talking about?"

She slapped his arm. "You know very well what I thought, so don't play dumb."

"Do you have one?"

Alex's cheeks turned bright red. "No, I most certainly do not."

"Why? You don't need one?"

"No, I don't want one," Alex stressed. "My sex life is perfectly normal, thank you very much."

"It's normal to have a few toys." They were finally next in line, so Scott began to stack their purchases on the conveyor belt.

Alex couldn't believe she was having this conversation in her neighborhood Winn-Dixie. She bent down to scoop up several packs of popcorn to help him out. "Do you have any?"

"Toys?" Scott reached for his wallet and pulled out his debit card. "If I do, would I be able to tempt you into playing with them?"

"Maybe."

Scott grinned, the twinkle in his eyes almost as bright as the overhead lights. "Then we have just one more stop to make."

They got the groceries loaded into Scott's car and drove across town to a small store that Alex had never heard of. Scott came around to open her car door and she gave him a skeptical look. "I don't think I'm going to like this."

Scott grabbed her hand and hauled her to her feet. "Stop being a chicken. You're an adult with normal appetites."

She glanced around the parking lot nervously. "What if someone sees me?"

"If they see you, what can they say? They would incriminate themselves by being here also."

"You do have a point."

"I know I do. I'm a lawyer, remember?"

It quickly became clear to Alex what sort of store it was when she was carded at the front door. The walls of the small store had no windows, and the lighting was very poor. She took a quick look around, reluctant to let her eyes meet those of any of the other customers in the room.

Shelves along the back wall housed movies with dubious titles and pornographic images. A curtain partitioned half of the room into a private niche. The rest of the shelves and counters were piled with costumes, games, and odd-looking knick-knacks.

"Hiya, Clause! Long time, no see."

A petite woman, with multiple piercings and goth make-up, rushed forward to greet them. Scott hugged her and stepped back to survey the room. "Business seems to be booming, Gretchen."

"Well, you know," Gretchen answered with a so-so look.
"I'm doing pretty good since that low-life husband is out of my life." She plopped her hands on her hips and glanced around the room. "Are you looking for something in particular? We just got a new shipment in and there are some pretty interesting things in our back room."

Scott glanced at Alex, who was giving him the evil eye. "Nah, we're just browsing."

Gretchen winked mischievously. "In that case, let me know if you two need any help finding something."

Scott slid his arm across Alex's shoulder. "We will. Thanks."

Alex, who'd bitten her tongue during the conversation, jabbed Scott in the side. "Come here often?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

Alex glanced back at Gretchen. "You seem pretty familiar with the owner back there."

"Gretchen? She was a client of mine a few years ago. One of my first, actually. It was a very messy divorce."

"Oh."

Scott tweaked her nose, "Jealous?"

"No," Alex lied through her teeth. Jealousy did not even begin to describe the way she felt when other women flirted

with Scott. It was more like infuriated rage. Not something as tame as *jealousy*.

Scott grabbed her hand and began to lead her toward the back of the room. She pulled back and planted her heels. "Where are we going?"

He tilted his head in the direction of the private alcove. "To see Gretchen's new toys. I want to buy you a Christmas present."

"No way! I'm not going in there."

"Yes, you are."

"No, I'm not."

Scott grabbed her other hand and tugged lightly. "Aren't you the least bit curious?" He pulled her slowly forward until their chests were touching. "Set aside your inhibitions and experience life for the first time."

She huffed. "Buying dildos is not the way I want to experience life."

Scott's eyes gleamed as he looked down at her. "Just think of what you could do with that dildo. Imagine what I could do to *you* with it."

Alex's knees went weak. He did have a point. "Okay, I'll go in, but," she paused to point her finger at him, "if you even try to pick up a six-foot penis, I'm outta here."

He laughed at her serious look. "Do you think Gretchen has a bag big enough to cover a six-foot penis?"

"It wouldn't surprise me if she does."

Scott pushed back the curtain so that Alex could pass. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the semi-darkness,

but once they had they about popped out of her head. "Dear God, they really do have six-foot penises!"

Scott glanced at the dildo propped against the wall and smothered a laugh. "Are you sure you don't want that for your present?"

"I'm positive." Alex nudged him aside and walked further into the room. She spun around in a slow circle, her eyes eating up the profusion of sexual toys on display. She'd never imagined such a variety.

"Hey, look at this!"

Scott held up a pink tongue that began making licking motions when he pressed a button. "Care for one?"

Alex's cheeks flamed. "No, thank you."

"Ah, you're no fun," Scott teased, as he put the tongue back on the shelf. "Aren't you going to explore?" he tossed over his shoulder at her.

She picked up a pair of red velvet handcuffs and twirled them around her finger. They seemed the safest object in the room. "What about these?"

Scott eyed her selection. "Too tame." He moved a couple of feet over and picked up a neon green penis and handed it to her. "You can imagine you're having sex with an alien."

She tossed it back to him. "Once again, no, thank you." "You're very picky," he accused.

Alex felt a spurt of mischievousness when her gaze fell upon a small package. "This is what I want." She picked it up and handed it to Scott, who gave her a look of surprise.

"Nipple clips?"

She nodded. "Yes. If you have to buy me something, this is my choice."

"I never knew you liked it rough."

She pushed aside the curtain and exited the alcove. "How would you? We've never discussed my sex life."

After he paid for the nipple clips, they walked back to the car. He opened the door for her and handed her the black bag Gretchen had put their purchase in. "I can't wait to see those on you."

She slid into the bucket seat and grinned up at him before tossing the bag back to him. "Correction. I can't wait to see them on you."

He caught the bag easily with one hand. "That isn't happening."

"It's my gift. I get to say how we'll use them."

She shut the door in his face, gratified by the look on his face as he'd realized he'd just been outmaneuvered.

* * * *

Scott lived in a gated community in a well-to-do development off Vaughn Road. She'd been to his house once before with her father, but as she entered the door now she was filled with nervous anticipation.

"Where do you want me to put these bags?"

Scott used his chin to motion to the back of the house since his hands were loaded with their purchases. "The kitchen table. Do you remember the way?"

Alex lugged the bags to the table and began unloading popcorn and Jello packages. "I still don't understand what

you're going to do with all these," she said, as Scott joined her in the kitchen and dumped his bags down with a grunt.

"Patience. You'll find out soon enough."

Alex stuck her tongue out at him as soon as his back was turned. Her cheeks flamed when he turned and caught her immature gesture.

"I saw that."

She busied herself with putting away the groceries. "You were supposed to." After the last bag was put away, she lifted the needle and thread they'd purchased. "Do you want to get started stringing the popcorn? It's probably going to take all night."

Scott came up beside her and bent his head to lightly kiss her nape. "If it's gonna take all night, then we're definitely not stringing popcorn. I've got better plans in mind for you."

She turned in his arms, the needle and thread clattering forgotten to the table. "Do you now?"

He pressed his hips against hers and she could feel the press of his arousal against her belly. He ran his tongue from her left clavicle to her right as he began to ease down the strap of her dress. "I do."

She dropped her chin and pressed her lips to his cheek. "What if I don't like what you have in mind?"

He lifted his head and pinned her with a hot look. "Oh, you'll like it. Trust me."

She was sure she would, but she couldn't resist teasing him. It was such fun watching him rise to the bait each time. "What about the Jello? You promised me you would share your family's tradition with me."

Scott gave her a crooked smile. "Well, it's not so much my family's tradition as my own."

Alex lifted an eyebrow. "This should be interesting."

Scott let go of her and began loading Jello packages into his arms. "Follow me."

She did as he asked, curiously watching as he dumped them in the center of the kitchen and went back for more. When he came back with and handed her a spoon, she began to grow suspicious. "I hope you don't expect me to eat all that."

"No," Scott said and shook his head. He picked up a pack and ripped it open. Dipping his spoon in it, he scooped out a wiggling mass and flicked it at her.

Her mouth fell open in shock. "I cannot believe you just did that!"

Scott chuckled and did it again. "It's fun. You should try it."

She swiped at the green mess oozing onto her face and glared at him. "You are so immature." Even as she said it, she was opening her own pack and slinging it at him. "Ha! Gotcha!"

They chased each other around the room, alternately tossing Jello and laughing at the mess they made of each other. When they were both splattered head to toe in red and green, they collapsed upon the floor panting for breath.

She clutched her stomach and gasped. "I'm never going to be able to wash this off me."

Scott levered himself over her, trapping her between the floor and his chest. "Admit it. You're having fun."

She leaned back and brought her legs up to encircle his waist. "I'm having a little fun."

"Just a little?"

Scott lowered his body against her slowly. "What can I do to make your Christmas more enjoyable?"

A wicked light entered her eyes. "You can start by kissing me."

"Only a kiss?"

She tilted her head back. "It's a start."

He took his time lowering his head. Just when she was about to scream, he touched his lips to hers. His tongue smoothly entered her mouth, the tip teasing the inside of her bottom lip. She rubbed her tongue against his, drawing it further into her mouth. Their teeth lightly clicked as he deepened the kiss.

Pressed against the tiled floor, Alex delighted in the feel of his hard, lean body against hers. His belt buckle pressed against her belly, but the throbbing length of his dick against her thigh overwhelmed that sensation. She undulated a little, rubbing her crotch against him.

"I have to touch you," he whispered against her mouth, before pulling back and reaching for the hem of her skirt. Before she knew it, her dress was pushed to her waist and his fingers hooked into the band of her thong. He pulled the thong off and tossed it over her shoulder.

When he came back for another kiss, his fingers brushed against her sex with long, sure strokes. His mouth moved from her lips to her cheek where he licked the remains of Jell-O from her face.

"I don't think this is quite what Bill Cosby had in mind when he became the Jell-O spokesman," she teased shakily. His fingers circled the outside of her pussy before dipping inside to tease her G spot, and she moaned into his shoulder.

Scott slid down and began kissing her neck as his fingers continued their sweet torment upon her senses. Her hips lifted from the couch and ground against his palm. Her thighs twitched and her eyelids fluttered as small tremors began in the pit of her stomach. Realizing she was close to orgasm, she pushed his hands away and began fumbling with his belt.

"I'm tired of coming alone," she said by way of explanation.

Scott allowed her to unbuckle his pants and slide his dick free. Together they managed to get his pants around his knees, but no further, before he began to slide inside her.

"I tried being patient."

She hooked her legs high on his waist and held on. "I know you did. Now try being greedy for once."

Scott pushed forward, his cock easily sliding into her. He began moving, his hips slowly retreating and sinking back against her. She felt his hard length inside her and knew no one had ever felt so perfect.

Scott dropped his head onto her shoulder and his hot breath puffed against her neck as his movements sped up. "God, you feel good."

She slipped her hands under his shirt and ran her fingernails across his smooth back. "So do you."

He gripped her hip with one hand and pulled away slightly. "We're forgetting something."

Alex's mind raced. What were they forgetting? Her face cleared. "Oh. A condom? Don't worry. I'm on the Pill."

"No. Although you do have a point." He gave her a sheepish smile. "Sorry, I didn't even think about protection."

"It's alright. I didn't either at first." She pushed her hips against his, silently urging him to continue.

Scott sunk back against her and let out a groan. "Your present. We're forgetting to use the nipple clips I bought you."

She smacked her hands against his bare ass. "Later. Right now, I want you to finish what you started."

"Impatient?"

"Hell, yes, I am! You've been teasing me all night."

"Not half as much as you've been teasing me," he shot back.

Alex threaded her fingers through his hair and brought his face down for a kiss. "Just shut up and make me come already."

* * * *

"Damn! Those do hurt!"

Alex laughed at Scott's wounded expression. "I told you so."

Scott yanked off the nipple clips and rubbed his chest. "I'm sorry. You can throw them away if you want."

She laughed and tenderly massaged her own sore nipples. She'd only worn them for a minute, but the look on Scott's face had been worth the small amount of pain she'd suffered.

"Keep them. Maybe you can use them on a pair of jumper cables."

Scott tossed the clips aside and they clattered as they hit the tiled floor of his bedroom. "I think not." He rolled over to lie atop her. "I'll get you a better present."

She wrapped her arms around his naked waist. "What could be better than this?"

Scott kissed the tip of her nose. "A trip to Fiji." His lips trailed across her cheekbone. "A weekend in Paris."

She gave him a mock look of disappointment. "Do you mean I could've had those instead of a trip to the local perversion center?"

He drew back the sheet and gazed upon her pale limbs sprawled so enticingly against his plaid sheets. "I didn't think you would actually agree to let me buy you something. You surprised me tonight."

"I did?" She placed the soles of her feet against the bed and shifted so that she was placed more comfortably against the pillows. Her naked thigh brushed his stomach, and she enjoyed the feeling of his tight muscles against her skin. He had such a wonderful body, lean and hard in all the right places. Her gaze moved to his cock, which was hard and throbbing. "Did you think I was a prude?"

He got to his knees and used his hands to push her thighs apart. "No. A little sheltered, maybe."

His fingers slid up her thigh and began caressing her outer labia. She bit back a moan. "Being sheltered doesn't necessarily mean I don't enjoy sex."

"Do you?"

Her brows drew together in a mock frown. "After coming as many times as I have tonight, you dare to ask me that question?"

He used his thumb to tease her clit as his middle finger slid inside her. "I just want to make sure you're enjoying yourself."

She wrapped her fingers around his wrist and undulated against his hand. "I am enjoying myself thoroughly, I assure you."

He replaced his fingers with his dick, and she moaned softly as he moved inside her. It was the third time they'd had sex in less than two hours and she was surprised by his show of stamina. "Tell me honestly ... are you taking Viagra?"

He laughed, and the sound rumbled against her belly. "I'm all natural, darling. No chemical enhancements, I swear."

She arched against him and turned so that she was lying half atop him. "Can I use the nipple clips on you again?"

His smile slowly faded. "If you want," he answered slowly.

She was tempted to retrieve them just to torture him a bit longer, but the feel of him inside her was too pleasant to give up. She rose up on her knees and slid slowly down, impaling herself fully. "Maybe next time."

Scott sighed with genuine relief. "I think you made my dick shrivel."

She bit her lip to hide a grin. "No, I didn't. You're still long and hard."

"For now," he said, and began to meet her thrusts with a parry of his own. "But mention those clips again and you'll be surprised just how quickly I do shrivel."

She licked his chin teasingly. "I know a better way."

"I'm sure you do." His hands cupped her ass as he lifted her and brought her back down upon him. "Why don't you show me?"

"It'll be my pleasure."

Alex rolled her hips, delighting in the strangled moan she drew from Scott. Shivers radiated out from the place they were joined to the tips of her fingers. Moments later, she collapsed against his chest and let out a satisfied sigh.

"You're cute." Scott tangled his fingers in her hair and gave her a soft tug.

"You are, too," she mumbled against his chest. She was sweaty and exhausted and a bath was beginning to be one of her number one priorities. "Even though I look like something the cat dragged in."

His chuckled rumbled against her breasts. "You make a cute mouse."

She rose up and gave him a mock glare. "Stop calling me cute." She preened under his gaze and lifted her arms to display her breasts. "How about gorgeous? Or sexy? Or maybe even radiant?"

His fingers traced the curves of her hips as she moved back against him. "How do you like beautiful?"

Her heart stopped beating for the tiniest second. "That'll do," she replied, right before he kissed her again.

* * * *

[&]quot;Where are you?"

Alex drew the sheet around her nude body and slowly slid off Scott's bed. She cradled her cell phone to her ear as she crept across the room toward the door. Once she was in the hallway, she answered.

"I'm fine, Daddy. I'm with Scott."

"I know that, sweetheart," Cliff spoke hesitantly. "But why are you with him?"

She briefly thought of telling him the truth, but she didn't want him to be disappointed in her. Besides, he had to suspect what was going on. It was morning already and she hadn't returned to the house. She slid down the wall and sat tailor-fashion on the floor, with the sheet tucked around her. "I didn't want to be at the party anymore, Daddy."

"You could've just said so instead of making such a scene with one of my lawyers."

Alex's back teeth began grinding. What was so wrong about being carried off by a sexy man? Half the people there probably thought it was romantic. Screw the other half. "Daddy, I didn't do anything wrong."

"Are you sleeping with him, Alex?"

She nearly dropped the phone in her surprise. Never had her father discussed sex with her. Why would he bring it up now? "That's none of your business," she answered slowly.

"It is when it concerns one of my employees. Damn it, Alex! What are you doing getting involved with someone when you're leaving in a few months?"

"Seven months," Alex interjected. "I don't leave until June."

"Regardless, you know better."

"Do I?"

"I hope so." Cliff heaved a huge sigh. "Just come on home, honey."

Alex had never disobeyed her father. She'd never argued with him, but enough was enough. "I'm not coming home."

"Don't make me come get you," Cliff warned.

Alex's mouth dropped open in shock. "I'm twenty-six years old. You can't boss me around anymore."

"I'm your father, Alexandra. I can do whatever the hell I want."

Usually when her father called her by her entire name, she knew he was being serious. She ignored the warning bells going off in her head and refused him again. "I'm not leaving, Daddy. I'm staying with Scott for Christmas."

"Put him on the phone."

Alex shook her head even though she knew he couldn't see the gesture. "He's sleeping."

"Wake him up."

"No."

"Alexandra, stop being difficult. Let me speak to Scott."

The door creaked open behind her, and she felt a tap on her shoulder. "Who are you talking to?"

Alex glanced up and covered the phone receiver with her hand. "My father."

Scott held out his hand for the phone. "I'll talk to him." Alex refused to let go. "You don't owe him any apologies." "I'm not going to apologize."

Alex handed the phone over, tempted with the urge to clamp her hands over her ears. This was bound to be a

difficult conversation. Most girls dreamed of being fought over by two men, but she was quite sure this was not what they imagined.

"Hello, Cliff." Scott paused to listen to whatever Alex's father was saying on the other end. "Yes, she's fine. I've invited her to stay for the weekend. I'll bring her home on Sunday."

From the voice she could hear coming over the phone, Alex knew her father was not happy.

"Yes, I do think Christmas is a time to be with friends and families," Scott answered. "That's why she's with me. Alex is my friend and it's time she enjoyed Christmas for once instead of being forced to take part in silly traditions she'd rather not participate in."

Alex clamped a hand over her mouth. Dear Lord, Scott was going to get himself fired! And her killed, probably. She dug her fingers into his leg and whispered, "Are you trying to make him mad?"

Scott shushed her and cocked his head to one side as he continued to listen to Cliff. "I see. Well, it appears that we have a dilemma."

Alex groaned and drew the sheet over her head. What in the world was Scott doing? She heard her phone snap shut a moment before Scott tugged the sheet down. He crouched down in front of her to meet her eyes. "Cliff says he'll see you Sunday. You can open presents then."

"But that's the twenty-sixth! Daddy always opens presents on Christmas morning."

"Well, it appears he's changed one of his traditions." Scott stood, putting his naked parts right in front of her face.
"Come on, let's go get a shower."

"Together?" A hint of mischief entered her eyes.

"Of course." Scott helped her to her feet and slid the sheet off her. "And then you can help me make breakfast."

Alex lifted an eyebrow. "I don't know how to cook."

"Neither do I, but I'm sure we can learn."

Alex's stomach chose that moment to rumble. "I hope you're a quick study, cause I'm starving."

"That's what having sex all night will do to you," Scott teased as he began adjusting the knobs of his walk-in shower. Steam began to fill the room as he pulled her under the pulsating spray.

"Oh, man!" Alex sighed. "This feels awesome."

Scott grinned and reached past her to flip another knob. "Then wait until you feel this."

The spray turned into a fine mist that still somehow managed to massage the tiredness from her shoulders. "Ooh, I'm getting one of these."

"Why?" Scott asked flippantly. "You can just come over and use mine anytime you want."

She cupped water in her hands and teasingly flicked at him. "You'd better be careful. I might just take you up on your offer."

"Anytime." Scott flicked a handful of water back at her. "Turn around."

Their wet limbs slipped against each other as she did as he asked. She glanced over her shoulder at him when she heard

the squirt of shampoo. She let out a contented sigh when he began to massage her head. "I'm definitely coming over more often."

"That's my plan," Scott said as his fingers stroked from her nape up to her crown. "How do you like this Clause tradition?" he whispered against her neck.

"It's really high on the list," she answered, as her head fell forward so that he could continue to wash her hair. "Keep this up and you'll never get rid of me."

"Once again, that's my plan."

Alex stayed silent and enjoyed the sensation of his hands tenderly massaging her scalp. Even though she didn't speak, her mind raced with silent questions. Was Scott interested in a relationship with her? He seemed to be, although it would be ridiculous with her leaving in seven months. Even if she went to school closer to home, it wouldn't work between them because she would be too busy with her studies. At most, all she could offer was a quick tumble in bed during vacations. Why would he choose now to show an interest in her? She'd admired him for four years and she hated knowing that she might have had him during that time.

"What do you want for Christmas dinner tomorrow?"
Alex thought of the feast the Barretts normally had.
Turkey, ham, dressing, all the vegetables you could think of.
Her answer came quickly. "Pizza."

Scott's fingers stilled. "Pizza? Are you sure?"

She nodded, making a small squeak when she accidentally tugged her hair. "Pepperoni and mushroom pizza with double

cheese." She clamped a hand to her still rumbling tummy and smacked her lips together. "That's what I want."

"Pizza it is then. What about dessert?"

She turned toward him, heedless of the shampoo still streaming down her back, and reached for him. "How about we go ahead and get dessert out of the way?"

Scott's soapy hands slid across her shoulders and down to cup her ass. "Sounds good to me."

* * * *

Alex dropped her partially eaten crust onto a paper plate and sat back with a groan. "I cannot eat another bite."

Scott bit into his fifth slice of pizza and chewed with relish. "This has to be the tastiest Christmas dinner I ever had."

She propped her feet on his thighs and gave him a little nudge with her toes. "Because of the company?"

"No, I just happen to adore pizza."

"More than me?" she teased, and nudged him again. This time her toes came close to his groin.

He lifted her feet with one hand and stuffed the remainder of the pizza slice into his mouth. Now that his second hand was free, he used his fingers to tickle the bottom of her foot.

"Stop it!" Alex squealed. "You're getting pizza grease all over me."

"You're just saying that 'cause you're ticklish," Scott accused. He started tickling her other foot, laughing when she tried to kick him and missed. "Okay, I'll stop."

He dropped her feet and she quickly hid them under the edges of the robe she'd borrowed from his closet. They'd

stayed in bed all day, only emerging to order the pizza he'd promised her. Alex glanced around the room, her gaze landing on the family portrait hanging over Scott's mantel.

"What is your family doing this Christmas?"

"My parents are in France for the winter. My sister and her kids are skiing in Aspen."

Alex felt a little sorry for him. "It's a shame you're all alone."

"I'm not alone. I have you here with me."

"True, but it's nothing like being with your family for the holidays."

Scott's dark eyes focused on her. "Do you miss them? Today is the day your father's family arrives."

She shrugged her shoulders. As much as she hated to admit it, she was missing her father and his stupid traditions. That morning, she'd awakened and half expected Cliff to be shaking her arm, telling her that Santa had arrived. She'd come downstairs for a glass of water and the emptiness had hit her. At home, there was always people and talking and laughter. At Scott's, the silence seemed oppressive. She loved being with him, but she felt like a total Scrooge for ditching her family during their favorite time of the year.

She glanced at her watch. "Right now, Uncle Carl is probably donning his Santa suit."

Scott leaned back against the couch and smiled crookedly. "And getting ready to pinch all the pretty girls' asses."

"He's a perv. What can I say?" Alex's smile slowly faded. Sure, Uncle Carl was a mess, but he was family. She was

struck by another wave of loneliness. "And Cousin Jenna is handing out her famous eggnog."

Scott seemed to sense her wavering emotions. "You don't like eggnog, remember?"

"I know, but she always sneaks a nip of rum into mine," Alex confided in a slight whisper.

"Ah! That explains a lot." Scott sat, took her hand, and held it. "Do you want to go back?"

Did she? Alex glanced at his concerned face, remembered the good time she'd been having with him, and then weighed it against the times she'd had with her family. The Barretts were loud and boisterous and a bit overbearing, but they were all she had. Any one of them would lay down his or her life for her.

She made her decision instantly. "Would you mind?"

Scott was on his feet and reaching for her before she'd even finished speaking. "Come on. If we hurry, we can it make it in time for eggnog."

Scott drove like a bat out of hell. The twenty miles back home seemed to take forever, even though he broke every speed limit posted. When they pulled up in the driveway, lights were blazing cheerfully out of the windows in every room. Pine garlands were strung across the front of the house and the sounds of Christmas carols could be heard from inside.

Alex paused with her hand on the door handle. For twentysix years she'd wanted to escape this, only to find that it was truly a part of her. She was more her father's daughter than

she'd thought. How would she ever be able to leave all this behind in June when she moved?

She turned back to Scott, her stomach clenching with regret. How could she leave him after he'd become so important to her? She opened her mouth to speak. "Scott, I..."

He cut her off. "If you want to make it in time for Santa's appearance, you need to hurry."

Her face fell. "You're not coming in?"

Scott shook his head. "There's something I need to do. Will you be all right?"

She opened the door a crack. "Yes. I'll be fine."

Scott leaned over the console and gave her a lingering kiss. "Merry Christmas, Alex."

"Merry Christmas." She slid out of the seat and watched as he drove away. She knew he wasn't abandoning her, but she couldn't help feeling sad as he left.

A sharp burst of laughter and loud applause had her spinning back to the house. Uncle Carl must've just come out in his outdated, three-sizes-too-small Santa costume. Tripping over her high heels, Alex raced to the door and hurried to the ballroom. When she entered, curious eyes turned her way, but she ignored them. She glanced around the room, anxiously scanning the faces for her father. Her heart fell when she didn't see him. Had she let him down so much that he wasn't even going to join in the festivities?

"Alex! I've been looking for you."

Alex glanced down at the steaming cup placed in her hand and gave Cousin Jenna a sad smile. "I just got back. Where is everyone?"

Jenna's kind blue eyes bored into hers. "Your father is in his office."

Alex winced. "Is he upset?"

"I think he's more hurt than anything." Jenna patted her arm comfortingly. "Go talk to him."

Alex turned and headed the short distance to her father's office. She knocked softly and stuck her head inside. "Can I come in?"

Her father had something in his hands, which he hurriedly hid under a stack of papers when she appeared. "Did you just get back?"

"Yes." Alex came in and shut the door softly behind her. "I had Scott bring me back a few minutes ago."

"I thought I heard that hotrod car of his," Cliff said, and ran his hand through his silver hair. "Have you eaten?"

Alex crept closer and stood at the edge of his desk, feeling like a recalcitrant child. "We had pizza earlier."

Cliff lifted his head and a small smile lifted the corners of his mouth. "You always loved pizza. I should've let you eat it more often."

Alex sat on the edge of the desk and gave him a concerned look. "Why are you hiding out in here? Uncle Carl just came out in his Santa suit."

"My brother loves to be the center of attention. He doesn't need me out there."

"But I'm sure he would want you with him," Alex suggested, and felt guilty again for abandoning her father during Christmas. "Daddy, I'm sorry I left."

He shushed her. "No. You were right to leave. I shouldn't have forced my enjoyments on you for all these years. When you were little, you loved Christmas. I should've realized that you'd grown up and let you go a long time ago."

"I still love Christmas, Daddy. Just not as much as you do." She smiled to soften her words. "I don't think anyone loves it as much as you." She caught sight of a photo sticking out from under the edge of his papers and reached for it. "What is this?"

She slid the photo out of its hiding space and glanced at it. Her breath caught in her throat. "Where did you find this?"

She stared at the picture of her as a toddler putting the star on top of the Christmas tree. Her father was holding her and her mother, who'd died the next year, was gazing up at them with love shining in her eyes.

She was surprised to see tears in her father's eyes as she handed him back the picture. "We were happy that Christmas. The next month, your mother got sick, so I guess that's why I'm so fond of the holiday. It's the last time I remember being truly happy."

"Oh, Daddy!" Alex's eyes teared. "You should've told me! I never realized." Looking back, it explained a lot. The reason her father made such a big deal out of Christmas, why he was so reluctant to let her go. And now she was leaving him all alone. "I can stay if you want. I don't have to go to Yale."

"No, I want you to go." Cliff gave her a serious look. "You'll make a wonderful attorney, young lady."

"Just like my father."

Cliff turned his hand over, his silent invitation for her to put her hands in his. "Where's Scott?"

Alex's cheeks flamed. "He had to leave."

"Is he coming back?"

Alex shrugged. "I'm not sure."

"He'd better. If he hurts my little girl, he'll have me to answer to."

* * * *

It was a little after ten when Scott finally made it back to the Barretts'. The celebration was in full swing and he knew everyone would be gathered in the ballroom to exchange gifts. Immediate families did so in the morning, but they saved co-workers and friends for the evening. Cliff liked to stretch out the holiday as much as possible.

Patting his pocket, Scott wondered what Alex would think of his gift. It was not quite as creative as nipple clips, but he had a feeling that she would like it. Some might say he was acting impulsively, but he'd known Alex for four years. In that time, he'd seen her nearly every day. She was perfect. The perfect friend, the perfect woman, the perfect lover.

When he entered the room, his gaze was drawn to Alex, who was ripping open a gaily wrapped present. She pulled out a green cashmere sweater and smiled brightly. "Thank you, Tommy. It's beautiful!"

Scott glanced at his friend who lifted his glass at Alex in a salute. "My wife picked it out."

Alex gave Carly a polite smile. "Thank you, Carly."

Scott's eyes widened the tiniest bit when Carly leaned into her husband and snuggled against him. "He's just being nice," Carly answered. "He really picked it out himself."

What had been going on? Tommy and Carly seemed to be getting along, which was a miracle in itself. This Christmas truly was full of surprises. One day, he would like to know what had happened between the two, but right now he had to find the ending to his own story.

He came forward, wading through the piles of discarded ribbon and wrapping paper and knelt before Alex. Her green eyes lit up when she noticed him. "Scott! What are you doing here?"

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small velvet box. "I came to give you this."

He heard the murmurs and sighs of the other guests as Alex lifted a visibly shaking hand to her mouth. "What is it?" "Open it and see."

She took the box and eyed it curiously.

"Damn it, Alex! Open it already!" Tommy called out, which caused several chuckles.

Alex laughed shakily as she opened the box. "Oh, my! It's beautiful!"

She pulled out the ring he'd purchased for her and held it to the light. It gave off a hundred sparkles from the perfect diamond in the center. "You didn't have to get me anything."

"Yes, I did."

"I'm sorry. I didn't get you anything."

He reached for her hand and slid the ring onto her finger. "Alex, there is one thing you can give me in return."

He saw the suspicion in her eyes and, hopefully, a bit of excitement as well. "What is that?"

"Your hand in marriage."

Alex's face brightened, and she threw her arms around his shoulder. "Yes." She didn't even pause to think about it. "I'll marry you."

Excited applause broke out among the guests as Scott stood and pressed his lips to hers. "You've made me very happy."

"Ditto here."

Someone cleared his throat behind them and Scott turned to face Cliff with a sheepish grin. "I hope you approve of your daughter's decision, Cliff."

Alex's father shook his hand. "Of course, I do. If I hadn't, you can be assured that I would've dragged her away by her hair had she tried to sneak off with you. I was hoping something like this would happen." Cliff frowned and gave Alex a brief look. "What about school?"

Her face fell. "Oh. I don't know."

Scott held up his hand. "We'll get married *after*..." he gave Alex a stern look. "...she finishes law school."

"But that'll be years!" Alex cried out.

Scott leaned close to whisper privately in her ear. "But just think of all the holidays we could spend together."

Her cheeks turned as rosy as her Uncle Carl's. "You're right."

Scott realized there was something else he hadn't done. Turning her in his arms, he gave her another kiss. "I love you, Alex."

"I love you, too."

The guests sighed again, sighs which quickly turned into laughter as Scott and Alex shared another passionate kiss. When they pulled away, they gazed at each other and joined in the last of the Barrett traditions ... being with those you love during Christmas.

The End

About the Author:

Robin credits her grandmother with first introducing her to the world of romantic fiction. She grew up reading her grandmother's dog-eared Barbara Cartland novels and Harlequins, all the while dreaming of the day her sultan/prince/knight would rescue her from the doldrums of day-to-day living.

Since then, Robin has learned that there is still more fun to be had in a book than real life, so she turned her hobby into something a bit more productive and began writing her own happily-ever-afters. Robin is currently dreaming up her next hero, but her readers can contact her at bookrobin@aol.com or through her website, www.robindanner.com

Passenger Side

Pepper Espinoza

Dedication

Passenger Side is dedicated to my wonderful husband in recognition of his steady support, and to Lisa Marie because she is a great friend, a talented writer, and a lovely person.

Chapter One

Rebecca eyed her bank statement with disgust. The low numbers made her stomach clench. She didn't understand. Hadn't she just deposited her paycheck three days before? Wasn't she working two jobs? The balance hovered just above zero, mocking her and her efforts. Rebecca put in a full forty-hour week as a bank teller and another ten to twenty hours as a server for a high-end catering service, but she still hemorrhaged money.

"I'm going to have to ask for more gigs," she muttered.

This was an option she had not exercised previously, and she wasn't thrilled about being forced into it now. But if she wanted to make extra cash, the Christmas season was the time to do it. Everybody, from directors to movie stars to lowly assistants, was throwing lavish parties in downtown LA and Beverly Hills, and they all called on the catering services of her employer, Star Parties.

Rebecca flipped through her cell phone's address book until she found Mike Sinclair's phone number. She knew from experience he would be more than accommodating, but it still rankled. Wasn't working fifty hours a week enough? Wasn't she allowed to sleep and relax and have fun?

"Star Parties, Mike speaking."

"Mike, hi, it's Rebecca."

"Rebecca! I was just about to call you. Or have Shelly call you, at least."

"Oh?" Rebecca didn't regret missing the chance to talk to Mike's mousy assistant.

"How would you like guaranteed jobs for the remainder of the holiday season? I'm talking on a nightly basis here," Mike said, his voice loud and buoyant.

"What's the catch?" Rebecca asked, on her guard.

He laughed. "You know me too well, sweetheart. You know Jeff?"

"Jeff the bartender?" Rebecca had worked with him a few times. She didn't know him personally, but she knew his type. Smarmy, arrogant, cocky, he was a spoiled kid with a pretty face from a wealthy family.

"The very one. It seems he went and got himself in a spot of trouble. His license has been suspended."

Rebecca blinked. "Well, that's awful for him, but I don't know what it has to do with me."

"Jeff is going to need help getting to gigs. You know he's our most popular bartender. People request him specifically when they call Star Parties."

It wasn't hard to imagine why. Most of their clients were older women planning posh soirees and huge bashes to impress their husbands' business associates and their fellow soccer moms. Jeff had a certain charm and he worked hard for his tips.

"Why doesn't he just hire a limo or take a taxi or something?"

"We both agree that it would be best for business if he rode with one of the servers."

"And I'm the lucky girl?"

"You've got the most reliable transportation and you live near him. I'm willing to pay for the extra work."

"Um, what if I don't *want* to be his personal driver?" Rebecca asked, not thrilled with the opportunity. Money was nice, but really, why couldn't Jeff take a taxi?

"It might be more difficult to find jobs for you."

Rebecca sighed, weighing her options. Work every night or don't work at all. Put in the most basic terms, it was an easy decision. "When do I start?"

"Tonight."

Well, she thought, it's a good thing I don't have any plans. Not that she ever had plans anymore.

"Get a pen, I'll tell you his address and the time he's expecting you."

"Yes, sir," she muttered.

Rebecca scrawled the address across the back of a grocery store receipt and punctuated it with a sad little frowning face.

"No later than six," Mike told her.

"Right."

"Hey, Rebecca, thanks. We really appreciate it."

"You know me, I aim to please." She hung up before he could rope her into some other distasteful job or errand.

Six? That barely gave her an hour to get ready. Rebecca hung her uniform in the bathroom to let the steam smooth the wrinkles, before turning the water as hot as it would go. She stripped, stepping under the punishing spray with a gasp. It shocked and burned and exhilarated her.

Rebecca pushed the hair out of her face, reveling in the scorching water. Her skin turned red, her back stung, her

muscles tightened, and the water pounded like her heart around her. Caught up in the astonishing sensation, her skin and flesh stimulated and tight, she forgot about the night ahead, focusing instead on the thrill of pleasure that raced with her blood.

Her hand moved between her thighs, and her finger brushed against her clit, but she resisted the temptation. Not only did she not have the time to do it properly, she resented the fact that she didn't have anybody to do it for her.

"I need a fuck buddy," Rebecca announced to the walls. Her voice echoed off the tiles, amplified. "And the neighbors probably didn't need to know that," she added.

Rebecca turned the hot water down, letting the cold water cool her skin and blood. No time for fuck buddies, no time for boyfriends, no time for relationships, no time to touch herself. Not anymore. "And probably not ever again," she sighed, as she lathered her hair with shampoo.

Ten minutes later, she emerged from the steamy bathroom to dry herself, checking the clock obsessively as time marched forward. Twenty minutes after that, she pulled on her uniform, offering a silent prayer of thanks that it didn't need to be dry-cleaned. Fifteen minutes later, she sat outside of Jeff's apartment building, trying to brace herself for his winning personality.

Rebecca could understand Jeff's appeal. He had a striking, memorable face and an easy-going smile. He charmed people with sly grins, twinkling green eyes and a flop of black hair that always fell over his left eye, no matter how many times he pushed it back. He wore nice clothes. He smelled good.

Not that she got close enough to smell him. Often.

Sometimes, when they passed each other in a tight hallway or a small kitchen, she noticed that he smelled like gingersnaps and *man*. She didn't know how else to describe it, and she didn't like to ruminate on it. But she would have plenty of time to analyze his grooming habits as she chauffeured him all over the Greater Los Angeles area.

Rebecca watched him as he walked out of the building, scanning the area for her car. He knew his appeal, of course, and he took advantage of it. She witnessed him charm women out of more than just their money, and they always came back for more. She honked her horn to get his attention. He waved and trotted over.

"Hey," he greeted, opening the door.

"Hey." She waited until he buckled up to start the car. "Where are we going tonight?"

"Up Mulholland. I've been there before, I'll tell you the way." He smiled and turned on the radio. "It'll be a nice party."

Rebecca watched, annoyed, as he fidgeted with the dials. Biting her tongue, waiting until he settled on a station before commenting. Why did he think he had the right to fuck around with her radio? Wasn't it the driver's decision?

"There we go," he said with satisfaction. She didn't recognize the song, but it already irritated her. Loud and obnoxious, she didn't need the extra distraction.

"Great." She pushed in a CD with a smile. "That's better." "Hey, I was listening to that."

"So?"

"So? You can't just turn it off..."

"It's *my* car, Jeff. I can do what I want." Rebecca signaled and pulled onto the busy road, sliding her car smoothly into the traffic.

"Who is this, anyway?"

She looked sideways at him, watching as he opened her glove compartment and started rummaging through the contents. "Wilco. And close that."

"Wilco? Never heard of them."

"So? What's your point?"

"I'm just saying is all. What kind of music do they play?"

"Alternative."

"Alternative?" Jeff shook his head. "I don't like most alternative stuff. Most of it is annoying and pretentious."

"Well, thanks for sharing your opinion. I'm truly a better person for hearing it."

"Hey, no problem."

Sighing, Rebecca tapped on her brake. She'd known traffic wouldn't be good, but this was worse than she expected. She stopped at a green light, unable to push into the crowded intersection.

"Why don't you just go for it?" Jeff asked.

"Because there's no room."

"So?"

"So there's no room."

"It doesn't stop these other people."

"And that's how accidents happen. I don't need to get broadsided today, thank you," Rebecca snapped.

"People don't like to sit at a green light," he told her. To punctuate his point, the guy behind them laid on his horn.
"See?"

"Tough shit," Rebecca muttered. The light turned yellow, then red. "See? I would have been stuck in the middle of the intersection."

"They would have waited until you got through."

"Right, like they could even see my little car in those fucking SUVs."

"This is going to take forever," Jeff said, rolling down the window.

"Why don't you drive if you have a problem?" Rebecca smirked. "Oh, wait..."

"Look, I'm not happy about this either. Do you think I like having my license suspended? I have a life, you know."

"Oh, boo-fucking-hoo. Like I don't have a life? Like I've got nothing to do except haul your ungrateful ass around?" Rebecca asked, as she gunned it through the intersection. "I didn't ask for this you know. I didn't call Mike and say, 'Hey, got an obnoxious jerk I can chauffeur?'"

"You think I'm an obnoxious jerk?"

Rebecca regretted her outburst at his hurt question. She didn't normally call obnoxious jerks 'obnoxious jerks' to their faces. But she didn't appreciate his nagging, and there was an Expedition right on her ass, its headlights blinding her.

"I didn't..."

"Because," he said, cutting her off, "I didn't request an annoying bitch."

Rebecca slammed on her brakes, pulled hard to the right, cutting off another Expedition, and pulled into a Stater Bros parking lot.

"Hey, what are you...?"

"Did you just call me a bitch?"

"Rebecca, look..."

Rebecca shut off the engine before turning to face him. "Did you just call me a bitch? Get the fuck out of my car."

"Rebecca, look, you can't kick me out."

"Get the fuck out of my car. Right now."

"We have to be at the party in less than an hour," Jeff reminded her. "Mike will be pissed if we're late."

"Oh, I'm not going to be late. I'll be right on time. Now get out of my car."

"Fine, but who will get fired when I don't show? Probably the person responsible for getting me there."

"Take a fucking cab. Like a normal person. What? Are you too good for taxis? Then hire a limo. Not *my* problem."

Jeff put his hands up in surrender. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I know. Look, I'll level with you, OK?"

"The clock is ticking," Rebecca said. "It'll probably take at least twenty minutes to get a cab over here for you."

"Rebecca ... Mike and I decided it would be best if people, you know, didn't know about this..."

"What do you mean?" Rebecca asked, curious despite herself.

"It won't look good for me or for the company if people realize I don't have my license ... especially if they find out it's because I have a DUI," he admitted.

Rebecca gaped. "A DUI? What the fuck were you thinking?"

"I know. I know. It was stupid. I'm never going to do it again. But until this gets straightened out, I should keep as low a profile as possible. I need your help," Jeff explained. He smiled, looking at her through his long lashes. "Please? You're the only sober person I know."

"Why should I help you? I mean yeah, I get some extra money, but come on ... You hardly deserve it," Rebecca said, undermining herself by turning the key in the ignition.

His smile widened. "I know I'm not worth it. I'm shit."

"Just ... don't talk again, OK? Keep your mouth shut until I need the directions."

"Will do."

"And especially keep your mouth shut about my driving."
"I promise."

Rebecca sighed. "Why do I have the feeling I'm going to come to regret not kicking you out of the car when I had the chance?"

Jeff shrugged, keeping his mouth shut, his lips compressed.

"Hold on," she said, as she pulled into traffic. "It might be a bumpy ride."

* * * *

Rebecca lifted a tray of *hors d'oeuvres*, balancing it on the heel of her hand. Girls bustled around her, dropping off empty trays and picking up fresh ones. They laughed and called out

to each other, but Rebecca was focused on her task. She had to concentrate, otherwise, her mind would drift to Jeff.

"I saw that you arrived with Jeff," Nancy said from behind her.

Rebecca spun around, nearly dumping the expensive caviar onto the floor. "What?"

"You and Jeff. What's up with that?" Her friend smirked. "I didn't think he was your type."

"Oh, really?" Rebecca asked the tall brunette. "What's my type?"

"I don't know. I've never actually seen you with a man. For all I know, you're a dyke."

Rebecca rolled her eyes. "I've got work to do."

"Hey, don't be snippy with me." Nancy grabbed her own tray, but she didn't step out of Rebecca's way. "I just want to know if something's going on between the two of you."

"Me and Jeff? No. I just drove him as a favor. Come on, get out of the way." Rebecca tried to side-step, but Nancy moved with her.

"Why are you in such a hurry? Those porkers can wait a few more minutes for more food. Now, I want to talk about Jeff."

Rebecca lowered her tray to the table, defeated. "What about Jeff?"

Nancy smiled. "Is he any good?"

Rebecca shook her head. "What?"

"You know, is he any good? He looks like he might be dynamite in bed..."

Rebecca rubbed her eyes. "I told you, there's nothing between us. I just did him a favor. It's not a big deal."

Nancy arched an eyebrow. "OK, fine. Maybe you haven't, but don't you want to?"

"No."

"Not even a little bit?"

"No!" Rebecca lowered her voice. "Did anybody else see us together?"

"Why do you care if nothing's going on?" Nancy asked.

"That's precisely why I care. I don't want everybody here getting the wrong idea about us," Rebecca explained.

"No, I don't think anybody else saw."

"Great, now come on before people start missing us. They might not need the appetizers, but they sure get grumpy when we're slow."

Rebecca followed Nancy out of the kitchen to the party. She plastered a large smile to her face and began to circulate around the room. There were many familiar and famous faces. Faces that would make her heart stop and her palms sweaty under any other circumstances. The first thing she learned on the job was that celebrities didn't like to be gawked at or reminded they are celebrities at parties. Especially by the staff.

Distracted by her own traitorous thoughts, and Nancy's as well, she didn't care who was eating caviar from her plate. Even if nobody else saw them arrive together, she knew Nancy couldn't keep the fact to herself. Rebecca imagined that every server there had already heard that the two of them were having hot, wild monkey sex.

Which was completely unthinkable. Ridiculous, even.

As Rebecca passed the bar, Jeff caught her eye and smiled. It wasn't a friendly how-are-you-smile, or a passing acknowledgement. The smile reached his eyes. It seemed like they were sharing a secret, or a joke. A joke that only two people on the planet would understand. She paused for a moment, caught off-guard, returning the smile despite herself.

The second passed and a woman with bright, white teeth caught his attention and ordered a champagne cocktail. Rebecca shook her head, moving again. He probably wasn't even smiling at her anyway. She wouldn't be surprised to discover that a leggy blonde had been standing behind her shoulder the entire time.

Rebecca's forced grin widened and she pushed him out of her mind. It would be a long night even without Jeff serving as a constant distraction.

* * * *

Rebecca limped out of the kitchen, holding her shoes in one hand and her purse in the other, in search of Jeff. The final drunk guest had just staggered out the door. Rebecca had helped clean the kitchen and load the van, bitterly noting that Jeff was nowhere to be seen. She couldn't help but hope that he had found his own way home, but, after everybody left, she could hear him outside of the kitchen, laughing.

He wasn't at the bar like she expected. Annoyed, she followed the sound of his voice to the library. Rebecca found him sitting on the couch with a vaguely familiar blonde,

laughing and joking, her hand on his leg, and his arm across her shoulders.

Rebecca leaned against the door jam, folding her arms. Neither one of them noticed her, too engrossed in each other. She checked her watch. Just shy of three in the morning, and it felt like it. Her feet and back ached, her head throbbed, and her gritty eyes longed for sleep.

The blonde's giggle was like shards of glass piercing her brain.

"Jeff?" She said, as she stepped into the room. "Does this mean you don't want to come home with me?"

Jeff looked up, startled. "Oh, Rebecca. I was just talking to..."

"Sindy. With an S," the blonde said with a wide smile.

"Nice to meet you Sindy with an S." Rebecca smiled sweetly. "Did you enjoy the party?"

"Oh, yes, it was *wonderful*. Did you see Martin Sheen was here?"

Rebecca nodded. "I did notice him."

"Anyway, Jeff was just telling me about all the people he's met. It's so exciting! His life is so glamorous."

"Oh, it is," Rebecca agreed. "But you know what's not so glamorous? Washing his dirty underwear." She waved a hand in front of her nose. "Living with this man is just impossible."

Sindy's smile faltered and she turned to face Jeff. "I thought you said you were single!"

"What? I am. Rebecca is just a friend..."

Rebecca shook her head. "That's what he tells all the pretty girls, sweetheart. But he always comes home with me at the end of the night."

Jeff's face turned a hectic shade of red. "Sin, she's lying. Really."

Sindy jumped to her feet and grabbed her drink from the end table. "I thought you were different. But you're just like everybody else."

Rebecca nodded. "He really is."

"Cheating on your girlfriend and then lying about it? While she's standing right here? You disgust me," Sindy announced, as she poured her rum and Coke over his head. "To think I almost showed you my breasts."

Rebecca waited until Sindy stomped out before erupting with laughter. Jeff wiped his face with a bar rag he pulled from his back pocket.

"I suppose you think you're real cute," he muttered.

She nodded, unable to speak. Tears rolled down her cheeks and she couldn't catch her breath. Every time she tried to stop laughing, she heard Sindy's dramatic exclamation, and the guffaws started again. To *think* that she had almost shown him her breasts!

"I can't believe you did that."

Rebecca shook her head, wiping her face. "I'm sorry ... it's just..."

"You're not getting paid to ruin my life, you know."

Rebecca nodded. "I know, I know. It's just one of the perks."

He stood up and pushed his wet hair out of his face. "She's never going to talk to me again."

"Oh, boo-hoo. I'm sure you can find a dozen just like her." Rebecca hiccupped. "Come on, I'm ready to go."

"Is that what this was about? You want to go home?" Jeff asked.

"Yeah."

"I normally don't leave until much later..."

"What's your point? We're on my schedule now."

"Are you serious?"

Rebecca nodded, all traces of mirth gone. Now she only felt tired and irritated. "You really have a hard time accepting the fact my world doesn't revolve around you, don't you?"

"Fine, let me grab my stuff."

"Hey, don't put yourself out on my account," Rebecca said. "Maybe you can convince Sindy with an S to give you a lift home."

"Maybe you're just jealous because nobody around here wants to take you home," he sneered.

Rebecca laughed off the barb. "Why the hostility? Because you won't get laid tonight? I promise, you'll survive."

"What if I really liked that girl?" Jeff asked. "What if I really wanted to get to know her better?"

"Would that be before or after she shows you her tits?" Rebecca asked, turning to the door. "I'm leaving now."

"This is not going to work," Jeff muttered. "I can't live like this."

"Welcome to Hell."

"Maybe you need to get laid. It might make you a more pleasant person to be around."

Rebecca spun around, the words flying out of her mouth. "And do you think you're the man for the job?"

Jeff's eyes widened. Her face flushed, the hot blood crawling up her neck and cheeks. They stared at each other for a long, silent minute. Rebecca couldn't read his face at all. She hoped he couldn't see the deep mortification reflected in her eyes, but she refused to be the first one to back down. She wasn't going to let him shame her into averting her gaze.

"You know," he said thoughtfully, "I might be *just* the man for the job."

Rebecca snorted. "Yeah, right. Not in your wildest dreams."

"Hey, you brought it up, not me."

She turned her back on him and started walking. "I am done with this conversation."

"What? Are you afraid?"

"I'm finished," she stated, pulling the front door open.
"Finished."

"You *are* afraid. Mmmm, what does little Rebecca have to be afraid of?"

"Shut up, Jeff," Rebecca warned, unnerved. What did she have to be afraid of, indeed.

"Don't try to play all coy with me. You wouldn't have brought it up if you didn't want it," he pointed out.

Rebecca spun around again and put her finger in his face. "You brought it up. Not me. You. And I'm not going to play your sick game."

"What sick game? I'm not playing a game here, Rebecca. I'm serious."

"Yeah, right. I'm sure you are." She hurried down the walk towards her car. She wished it was a safe haven from Jeff, but it would only be a prison until she dropped him off. At least there would be no traffic. She could have him out the door, away from her, in less than fifteen minutes.

"Hey."

Rebecca unlocked the car and tore the door open.

"Hey," he said again, from behind her.

"Get in the car," she said through gritted teeth.

Jeff grabbed her arm, spinning her around to face him. "I told you, I'm serious."

"I'm sure you are. Now let me go." She struggled to pull her arm away, but his fingers didn't loosen. He pushed her against the car, his other hand on her shoulder.

"Let me show you."

"What are you...?" Her question was cut off by his lips.

Rebecca's brain froze. her body stiffened. Every nerve seemed to misfire. Her flesh went numb and then blazed with heat. The familiar smell of gingersnaps filled her head and surrounded her, as she kissed him back without thought. Her mouth moved against his, until his tongue brushed against her lips. She opened them without hesitation. His body pressed against hers, solid and warm. His cock hardened against her thigh.

Rebecca knew she needed to break the kiss or he would overwhelm her. Every second they spent locked together, the closer she wanted to be. She wanted to crawl up his body,

wrap her arms and legs around him, and never let him go. She wanted to strip his clothes off, push him against the car, and have her wicked way with him. Every repressed desire flared to life, demanding attention, validation.

She tore her mouth away, pushing on his chest. They both gasped for breath, and he looked at her expectantly. "Just..." She finally whispered. "Just get in the car."

Jeff wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, nodding. "Fine."

Rebecca closed her eyes and counted to ten. Even if she did want him, even if she needed to be kissed and touched like that again, it couldn't happen. She learned a long time ago that you don't get naked with co-workers, not for any reason. It never ended well.

Chapter Two

Rebecca filled a plastic cup with water as she studied herself in the bathroom mirror. Expertly applied base covered the bags under her eyes, and a bit of eye shadow made her look sultry instead of sleepy. She rummaged through her purse, pulled out a bottle of painkillers, downing three with the water.

Somebody knocked the door. "Rebecca, you in here?" Rebecca tucked the bottle into her bag. "I am." "Jill's looking for you. It's time to serve dinner." "I'll be right there!" "OK."

Rebecca took several deep breaths, trying to center herself. Memories of the kiss had plagued her all night, keeping her from sleep. When she picked Jeff up, they didn't speak, but he looked at her with this funny, knowing grin that made her skin crawl. Things did not improve once they reached the party.

Rebecca brushed the stray hair out of her face, smiled, and pushed the bathroom door open. Dinner marked the halfway point. Just a few more hours, and she could make her escape.

Every time she brought a platter to the table, she had to walk by Jeff. And every time she walked by Jeff, he smiled. Or winked. Or just looked at her until she tingled. She ignored him, but she could always feel his narrowed green eyes on her as she moved. Compared to other festivities, this party was small and intimate, and she couldn't hide in the crowd.

Rebecca circled the table one final time, confirming that all the bowls, glasses, and baskets were full, before retiring to the relative sanity of the kitchen. Due to the size of the guest list, only a handful of servers were there, so she could find a quiet corner to catch her breath.

A sleepless night would have been bearable if she hadn't had to work the early shift at the bank. She could feel her body shutting down now, resisting the forty-eighth hour without rest. She collapsed in a chair, resting her head in her hands. She probably had about fifteen minutes before they would need her to fill the glasses and breadbaskets, perhaps another thirty before she would bring out the main course.

"Well, you found a cozy little spot," Jeff commented. "Hiding from someone?"

"Resting," Rebecca said, without looking up. "Besides, who would I be hiding from?"

"Me."

Rebecca raised her eyes. "Please. Why would I hide from you?"

"Because you're scared."

"Of what?"

He crouched in front of her and their eyes were even. "That I'll kiss you again."

"You won't."

"Oh? You sound so sure."

"I sound sure because I am. I don't want you to touch me, or kiss me, or talk to me, or ... anything else. Don't you have to work?"

"I get a break, just like you." He took her hands in his and lowered them to her lap. "There, now I can see your pretty face."

"Are you trying to make me hurl? Because, you know, it's working."

Jeff leaned back, surprised. "I've never inspired that reaction in a girl before."

"Maybe I'm not like the girls you usually pick up," Rebecca said. "I'm not going to fall for silly lines and trite compliments and ... sloppy kisses."

"Sloppy kisses?"

"Yeah, sloppy. You got drool all over my face," she said, lifting her chin.

"Drool? My kisses are not sloppy."

"Hey, I just call it like I see it ... or, in your case, felt it." Rebecca looked around, noticing they were all alone. The solitude wouldn't last for very long; she didn't want anybody to find her sitting in a dark corner with Jeff.

"Is that right?" He sounded offended, but she thought he was teasing her.

"Mmm, yeah. Look, somebody might come in soon and..."
"So?" He leaned closer. "Does that make you
uncomfortable."

"No."

"Nobody will find us back here," he said, his words mere breath against her face. "Nobody can see us."

"What's your point?"

Jeff knelt in front of her legs. "If you don't want to be seen, you're free to leave."

"I was here first. You leave," She snapped.

"You didn't get much sleep last night," he said, brushing the side of her face with his fingertips. "Why is that?"

"I got plenty of sleep."

"Your eyes are bloodshot. You're carrying suitcases."

Rebecca closed her eyes, turning her face away. "Are you just here to aggravate me?"

"No, actually, I came back here to do this." He put his hand on the back of her head and guided her mouth to his.

Rebecca wanted to resist. She thought of at least a dozen different ways to combat his advances before their lips touched. She could scream in his face, beat at his chest, turn her head away, accidentally-on-purpose kick him ... but she did none of those things. Instead, she opened her mouth to his, like it was the right and natural thing to do.

His fingers were firm against the back of her skull, but he cupped her face softly with his other hand. She clutched his shirt, folding the material between her fingers, as she slid forward on her seat and parted her knees. Her body didn't care what her mind said, what her common sense screamed. Her flesh wanted to absorb the heat from his body. She moaned, trying to pull away and move closer at the same time.

Somebody opened the kitchen door, and the sounds of laughter and clinking dishes pulled Rebecca back to Earth. She pushed Jeff away, gasping for breath.

"Are you trying to get us fired?" She whispered.

"Nobody is going to fire us."

"If Jill catches us making out..."

"Making out? That was just a kiss."

"Fine, whatever. If Jill catches us, we're toast."

Jeff smirked. "You've shifted tactics, I see."

"What are you talking about?"

"First you tried to convince me that you don't want me. Obviously, that's a lie. So now you're trying a different angle."

"It's not a tactic or an angle, it's the truth. You may not need this job, but I do. That's the only reason I agreed to ... to this insanity!"

He put a finger to his lips. "Lower your voice, if you're so worried." He rested his forehead against hers, speaking in a low murmur. "Why don't you just admit that you want me?"

"Because I'd hate to get between you and your ego," she said, jerking her head away.

"Rebecca? You back here?" Jill called from the kitchen door.

Rebecca's eyes widened. "I'm here." She jumped to her feet and tried to hurry away. "I'm just on my way out."

"We'll talk about this later," Jeff promised.

Rebecca yanked her hand away. "We will not."

"Sure we will. You'll be my captive audience." He smiled broadly and straightened. "And don't think I won't take advantage of that."

Rebecca rolled her eyes but her mouth ran dry. She hurried away from him and lifted a tray of bread and a pitcher of ice water. "Don't you have eggnog to serve or something?" She threw over her shoulder as she pushed the kitchen door open.

Jeff merely smiled at her.

An older gentleman Rebecca didn't recognize accosted her as soon as she stepped out of the kitchen, narrowly avoiding a splash of ice water on his chest. He was at least a foot taller than she was, with silver hair framing a long, handsome face. He had an air of importance, augmented by his custom tailored suit, Italian shoes, and Rolex watch.

"Oh," Rebecca gasped, "I'm so sorry. How clumsy of me." *Great, all I need is to drench some billionaire*.

"Nonsense, nonsense," he said, taking the pitcher from her. "That was entirely my fault." He narrowed his eyes, studying her face. "Are you alright, young lady? You look a bit feverish."

"Oh, it's just hot in that kitchen." She looked around. The rest of the guests were still seated in the dining room, enjoying the last of their soup. "Can I help you with anything?"

"Actually, I was looking for you."

Rebecca didn't have an escape route. She didn't like the look in his eyes, as he took a step closer. She could smell the alcohol on his breath. The tray weighed heavily on her hand, and she couldn't help but wonder why everybody wanted to waylay her when she had work to do.

"Oh?"

"I'm James Anderson, by the way."

"Rebecca Cooper." She smiled. "I would shake your hand, but..."

"Here, let me help you with that," he said, taking the tray. "Oh, really, it's OK." Rebecca bit her lip with frustration.

James deposited the tray on a nearby table then turned his attention back to her. "Ms. Cooper, I'm having a small party ... more like a gathering ... later this week, and I would like to employ your services," he explained.

"What? Oh, you'll want to talk to Jill—the one with the long, black hair by the bar—she's got cards and information ... though we may already be booked. We are pretty busy this time of year," Rebecca said, trying to catch Jill's eye without being conspicuous, but Jill was absorbed in her own conversation.

"No, no, I'm not interested in employing the entire catering service," he said. "I'm just looking for one or two girls. It's a very intimate party."

Rebecca shifted her weight. "I see."

"I'm willing to double your normal fee."

"That's very generous of you, but I..."

The kitchen door opened behind her, and, without looking, she knew it was Jeff. Her body reacted to his heat and proximity. Horrified, she stopped herself from taking a subtle step backwards, to place her back against his chest.

"Ahh, Mr. Anderson," he greeted. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Jeff, my boy. I could use some more wine."

"Coming right up." Jeff moved away from them, but turned when Mr. Anderson spoke again.

"Jeff, I was just telling Ms. Cooper I'd like her to help with the party."

Jeff's eyes darted to Rebecca and then back to James. "I don't think it would be a good fit for her."

"No? She seems quite diligent."

Rebecca's face flushed with indignation. "I'm standing right here, you know. And not a good fit for me? What do you know about it?"

"Jeff has been working as my bartender for the past several years," Mr. Anderson explained.

"So that means Jeff will be there this year as well?" Rebecca asked.

"Of course."

"James, can we talk about this?" Jeff cut in.

"It's none of your business," Rebecca snapped. "This is between me and Mr. Anderson."

"Please, call me James."

"Fine, this is between me and James. Now, what were you saying about the pay?"

James's smiled broadened. "How about I triple your pay?" Her smile matched his. "That sounds like a fair deal."

James looked over his shoulder at the rest of the guests with a grimace. "That old Griffith bat is beckoning me. I suppose I must be social now. Jeff, you'll fill her in on the details, right?"

Jeff's mouth twisted. "With pleasure."

James surprised her by kissing her cheek before he walked away. Rebecca watched him go with excitement and apprehension.

"Would you like to know what you just got yourself into?" Jeff asked, his lips twitching.

Rebecca lifted her chin. "I'm sure it's not that bad. He said there are only a few people."

"It's his annual Christmas party. His annual *swingers'* Christmas party," Jeff told her.

"Swingers? So? I don't care what people do to get off. It's got nothing to do with me," Rebecca said, reaching for her pitcher and tray again.

"Well, that's just the thing. He likes his parties to have a certain ... atmosphere. Which means a strict dress code."

Rebecca faltered. "What kind of dress code?"

Jeff grinned wolfishly. "You might want to go lingerie shopping. He likes red, lacy numbers."

Rebecca gaped. "You're not serious."

"I've got a festive pair of briefs myself. Red and green with a strategically placed snowflake. Oh, and a Santa hat. It's the hat that gives the party a bit of class."

Rebecca blushed. "You're serious?"

"I tried to warn you." Jeff shrugged. "You didn't want to listen to me. I guess you're listening now."

"Well ... other than the dress code ... I mean, I don't have to actually *do* anything, right?" Rebecca asked.

"Do anything?" He shook his head. "Of course not. But don't think people won't be *doing* things in front of you."

Rebecca did a quick calculation in her head. That single party would give her enough money to buy gifts for her father, as well as for herself, plus pay the phone bills. Not only would the extra money be satisfying, but so would the look on Jeff's face when she showed up in a red, lacy number, completely poised and not the least bit ruffled by the situation.

She could tell by the way he grinned at her that he expected her to chase down James Anderson and explain she changed her mind.

"When is it, exactly?"

"It starts on Friday night..."

Rebecca cocked her eyebrow. "Starts? When does it end?" His smile widened. "Whenever."

"Well, Jeff, I guess you have a ride for that gig, too."

"You're actually going to do it?" He asked, surprised.

"Why wouldn't I? The money's good, and it's just one night," Rebecca said defiantly.

Jeff buried his hands in his pockets. "It doesn't seem like your scene, is all."

"What would you know about my scene? You don't know me."

"I know your type."

Rebecca blinked, taken aback at the echo of her own thoughts. "Why don't you let me by? I think you've wasted enough of my time for one night."

Jeff stepped aside, bowing at the waist. "After you, my dear."

Rebecca resisted the urge to grind the heel of her shoe into his foot as she passed him, but just barely.

* * * *

Rebecca yawned as she rolled down the window, hoping the cool night air would shock her system. *Just a few more miles ... just a few more miles ...* her eyes began to droop...

"Hey!" Jeff snapped. "Watch where you're going."

"What?" Rebecca jerked. "I'm fine."

"You're fine? That's why you've been swerving all over the road?" Jeff asked. "You're going to get us pulled over here."

"I haven't been swerving..." Rebecca muttered with a thick tongue. Straightening, she blinked the fog out of her eyes. "I'm not going to get pulled over."

"You look exhausted," Jeff observed. "Haven't you been sleeping?"

"Why do you care?"

"Hey, it's my life you're risking here."

"You're distracting me, you know."

"But at least you're not falling asleep," he pointed out.

"What else can we talk about, hmm?"

"How you're going to find somebody else to inconvenience?"

"Do you have a boyfriend?" Jeff asked, as if she hadn't said a word.

"A boyfriend?"

"No," Jeff mused, "probably not. I bet you haven't had a boyfriend in awhile now, have you?"

"Do you really care?"

"Of course, I care. I have to know what I'm up against. Plus, I need to know if some guy is going to come after me because I'm taking you to a swingers' party," Jeff explained.

Rebecca rubbed her eyes. "No, no boyfriend."

"Nobody on the side?"

"God, what kind of question is that?"

"I just want to get to know you better." He turned in his seat and faced her. "Is that so wrong?"

"You know, I always wondered why those limos had big pieces of glass between the backseat and the driver. Now I'm beginning to understand."

"Hey, sweetheart, you don't want to talk about yourself? That's fine, I can tell you all about the party you signed up for." Jeff paused, gathering his thoughts. "There are about twelve couples, give or take, and they meet every Christmas. Started the tradition years ago."

"That's truly fascinating."

"They won't expect you to participate of course, but you better be comfortable with looking at, and walking in the middle of, lots of sex. You won't just be serving drinks, you know."

Rebecca sighed and navigated the empty street. Would it to be too rude to turn on the radio and drown out his voice? Did she care? He wasn't being particularly annoying, but she discovered his voice did funny things to her, like make her skin tighten. The more he told her, the more she tensed. It sounded different in the dark. Lower, sultry, like a caress. She could hear the inquisitive, curious smile in his words, and she slid her eyes sideways.

"Oh? What will I be serving then?"

"Condoms. Lube. Dildos. Vibrators. Cock rings..."

"Enough," Rebecca interrupted. "I get the picture."

"You still think you're up to it?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't I be? What do you think I am? A nun?" Rebecca's only problem with the party was Jeff, and his red and green briefs with the strategically placed snowflake.

"Not a nun. A prude."

"I am not a prude."

"Then why do you try to run every time I kiss you?"

"Why can't you just take a hint?" Rebecca asked as she guided the car into the parking lot of his apartment building. "Ah, home, sweet home. Out."

Jeff unbuckled his seat belt, but he didn't open the door. Instead, he leaned over and whispered in her ear, "You won't be able to resist me forever."

"Watch me."

Jeff ran his fingertips down her arm. She sucked in her breath, staring at his hand, watching it move on her skin. He barely touched her, but she felt electrified. "I think you want me right now," he murmured.

Rebecca swallowed past the lump in her throat. "I don't..."

His fingers moved up her arm, across her shoulder, and lingered on her neck, hovering like butterflies over her skin. She didn't understand how the barest whisper of contact could make chills roll down her spine.

Jeff kissed her neck, her cheek, the side of her mouth. "Come upstairs with me."

Rebecca shook her head. "No, I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because we work together," she blurted.

Jeff settled back in his seat. "Well, now we're getting somewhere, aren't we?"

"What do you mean?"

Jeff smiled. "It's not that you don't want me or that you don't want to have sex ... you just don't want to sleep with a co-worker."

"Does it make a difference?" Rebecca asked, though she recognized her mistake. Now she could no longer protest that she found him repulsive, that she didn't like the way he touched her or kissed her, because he knew the truth of the matter.

"Oh, yes. It's a small obstacle, easily overcome." He surprised her by opening the door. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"That's it?"

"Do you want something else?" Jeff asked, looking over his shoulder.

"No," she said, folding her arms.

"Have a good night." He climbed out of the car. "Pleasant dreams," he added, before slamming the door.

"Bastard," she muttered, starting the car. But she didn't drive away until long after he disappeared inside.

Chapter Three

It occurred to Rebecca as she pulled a skirt over her black silk panties that Jeff could be playing some sick, twisted game with her. Maybe he had lied about the whole thing, just to see if he could get her to dress like a whore. She imagined him laughing and bragging to his friends about what a stud he was.

The phone rang, and she jumped to grab it. "Hello?" "Rebecca?"

"Dad! I didn't expect to hear from you tonight. What's going on?" Rebecca frowned, waiting for a clue on his condition. Some nights were better than others, but unexpected calls rarely boded well.

"I was looking for your mother. Have you seen her?" His voice cracked, and she could hear the tears in his words.

Rebecca's heart twisted, and her eyes dampened. "Dad ... Mom's gone, remember?"

It was never an easy conversation to have. After two years, she should have an entire speech prepared, explaining that his wife and partner of thirty-eight years had passed on. After two years, she should be able to break the news to him.

"Gone? Where?" He sounded scared now. "I thought she was going out for milk, but we haven't got any."

"Dad, Mom passed away. You spoke at her funeral."
"It's so lonely here, Becky."

"I know, Daddy. I know, but I'm trying to fix that. I am."

She wanted nothing more than to bring her father home. She

wanted to take care of him, hold his hand, watch old movies with him, listen to his jazz records and catch that familiar sparkle in his eye. "Listen, is Henry there tonight?"

"Henry's here."

A kind man, Henry had befriended her father and had promised he would sit with him, keep an eye on him. Rebecca didn't know what she would do without Henry. "OK, Daddy, put the phone down and go get him for me, will you? I need to talk to him."

"I'll find Henry."

Rebecca waited so long she thought maybe her father had forgotten about his errand entirely. She was about to give up when Henry picked up the phone. "I'm here."

"I want to come over tonight, but I can't ... I've got to work..."

"I understand, Rebecca."

"Is he OK? Is he going to be OK? I suppose I could find somebody else if he needs me."

"Do what you have to do ... but it wouldn't hurt to visit him. Can you come over tomorrow?"

Fresh guilt pierced her and she wiped her eyes. "Yeah, yeah, tell him I'll come by and I'll bring him something special."

"I'll do that. And hey, don't worry about him, OK? He's in good hands."

Rebecca smiled as much as she could. "The best. Have a good evening, Henry."

"You, too."

She disconnected the phone, setting it down with numb fingers. Rebecca never imagined this would be her father's life. Except for his lapses of memory, Paul Cooper was still a vital and intelligent man. Much too young to live in an assisted living community, he deserved much more out of his golden years. But his heart couldn't seem to heal, and that made her ache.

A glance at the clock told her she didn't have time to sit there and wallow in frustrated misery. She had a job to do. Rebecca finished dressing, but she couldn't stop the tears from welling up in the corners of her eyes. "It's just the season," she muttered. "It'll get better. For both of us."

The words were a mantra that circled her mind. But, try as she might, she couldn't convince herself. She couldn't do anything about her blood-shot eyes, but she tried to camouflage their puffiness before she left her apartment.

"You're late," Jeff greeted through the open window when she pulled up.

Rebecca nodded. Just ten minutes, but he was clearly annoyed. "Sorry."

"It's not good business to show up late," he said, as he opened the door. "You may not care about your reputation, but I care about mine."

"I said I was sorry."

"The Friday night traffic is going to kill us. God, of all the days to be late."

Rebecca turned up the radio, trying to ignore him. He turned it down and continued his diatribe. "I should have known better than to expect a woman to be on time..."

"Shut up!"

Jeff looked at her curiously. "What's wrong with you." "Nothing."

He brushed her hair from the side of her face and she batted his hand away as though it was nothing but a fly. "Have you been crying?"

"No."

"Your eyes are red."

Rebecca turned the radio up again, keeping her eyes glued to the road. She felt like she was swinging from a ledge, holding on with one finger, waiting for a rescue party that wouldn't come. She couldn't talk to him and drive and focus and keep it all together. Not when she could still hear her father's wavering, lost voice.

"Look," Jeff said, "We have a long drive and..."

"Then let me drive," she snapped. "You're so worried about being late, but you won't let me concentrate."

"Do you think you can work like this?" He asked.

"Work like what?"

"You're a mess," he said. "I mean, you look fine, but you're giving off some horrible vibes..."

"Vibes? What kind of vibes?"

"Like if the wind blows the wrong way, you'll shatter. We're going to have a long night, Rebecca."

Rebecca blinked. "I've just been under a lot of stress. You know how it is."

"I do."

"You have no idea," she shot back. Rebecca took a deep breath, counting to ten before she spoke again. "I'm sorry ... I'm sorry, I shouldn't be snapping at you."

"Look, all I'm saying is that if you want to talk, I'm here to listen."

Rebecca pulled to a stop at a red light, turning to study his sincere face. Suddenly, she wanted to talk. She wanted to spill the entire story, shifting the weight from her shoulders to his to steal some of his strength. But that was a role for a boyfriend, or a husband, not a co-worker she couldn't tolerate—when she didn't want to strip him naked.

"Maybe talking about it will help," he added.

"And why do you care so much?"

"Maybe I don't like to see you cry. Maybe I'm bored." Jeff shrugged. "Maybe I don't want to listen to your crappy music. Besides, I'm a bartender. I got the most sympathetic ear you'll find."

"Well you've convinced me." She rolled through the intersection. "It's my dad, OK?"

"What about your dad?"

"He called me before I left the house," she said, her voice flat. "He wanted to know where my mother is."

"Where is she?"

"She had a stroke and died two years ago."

"Oh ... Jesus."

Rebecca swallowed. "He calls and asks about her all the time ... He lives in a retirement community now. I hate it, but what choice do I have? I'm gone up to eighteen hours a day.

I can't take care of him. He's fine most of the time, you know? That's what makes his ... episodes ... so much worse."

"Are you all he has left?"

"He's all I've got left."

Neither spoke for several minutes until Jeff broke the silence with a simple, "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"Yelling at you for being late. It's not that big of a deal. I shouldn't have."

"Thanks. So ... I couldn't find anything red and lacy."
Rebecca lifted her shirt. "Do you think that'll be a problem?"
She asked, trying to lighten the mood. Oddly, she did feel better after explaining the situation.

Jeff's eyes widened, his mouth fell open, and she heard him catch his breath. "That's ... wow."

"You think Mr. Anderson ... James ... will like it?" She pulled her shirt down.

Jeff blinked. "Like it? Oh, Rebecca, you'd look great in anything."

"Did you just compliment me?" Rebecca asked.

"Don't sound so surprised. You're stunning."

The blunt praise shocked her into silence. She couldn't think of a single retort. Instead of groping for words, she turned the radio up yet again and let the music fill the stillness.

* * * *

When James greeted them at the front door, Rebecca realized that Jeff had not been lying to her about the party.

James wore nothing but a pair of very brief briefs. Rebecca couldn't help but notice that he had an excellent body for an older man.

"I was worried you were lost," he greeted warmly. "I'm glad you found your way up here. Welcome to my humble home."

Rebecca had seen the mansions on top of the mountain from the freeway, but she had never seen one up close and personal. The sheer size of the building astounded her. It could have easily passed as a hotel, but people *lived* there.

"Come in, come in," he said, putting an arm around each of their shoulders. "The guests haven't arrived yet, so you should have time to change and get situated. You can use the guest bedroom. Go ahead and store your belongings there. Nobody else will use that room tonight."

Rebecca gaped as they stepped into the foyer. She had been working for the rich and elite of Los Angeles for years. Celebrities, politicians, and powerful businessmen never fazed her. She thought she had seen it all, but this was beyond her scope of reality.

The floor, pillars, and arches were made of rich green and pink marble, and a sweeping staircase dominated the entryway. Elaborate silver sconces hung on the walls. Overhead, a crystal chandelier twinkled and glowed. Jeff and James chatted, oblivious to her awestruck silence.

"Here we are. When you're ready, meet me in the kitchen and I'll go over the details." He smiled, opening the door. "I really am glad you could join us."

"Wow," Rebecca breathed when he departed. "Wow."

"It is pretty impressive, isn't it? He calls this place his cabin."

"Wow." Rebecca stood in the middle of the room, turning in slow circles, trying to absorb all the rich details. "This is just a guest room?"

"Yep. Come on, there will be time to look later. James is waiting for us." Jeff started unbuttoning his shirt, and her eyes focused on him. He continued undressing calmly, as if she wasn't even in the room, much less staring at him.

Rebecca curled her hands into tight fists, her nails pressing deep crescents into her palm. She wanted to touch him. She wanted to run her fingers down his perfect chest to his honed abs. She wanted to lick the curve of his hip and bite the sensitive flesh of his inner thigh. She looked at the huge bed from the corner of her eye, imagining the two of them falling onto the mattress in a tangle of sweaty, naked limbs.

"Rebecca?"

She blinked, tearing her eyes away from him. "Sorry ... sorry ... I was daydreaming. Sorry..."

"Are you going to change?"

"Of course." Rebecca took a deep breath and turned her back. She stripped quickly, revealing a black corset, sheer panties and matching black stockings. She tried not to think of him, naked, staring at her, but she could feel his eyes on her back. She draped her clothes over the bed, squared her shoulders, and turned around.

Rebecca gasped at the palpable lust in Jeff's half-closed eyes. Nobody had ever looked at her with such obvious longing. The room tilted beneath her feet, as her nipples

hardened. She tried to swallow, but her throat was tight. She tried to move but her arms and legs were paralyzed. His silk briefs left nothing to the imagination. His cock stiffened, and her own body reacted instantly, her clit ached for attention.

"God," he breathed.

Rebecca knew she needed to get out of the room and away from him. They needed space. She needed space, or she wouldn't be responsible for her actions. "We should go," she said through dry lips.

He nodded.

Neither of them moved.

Rebecca hadn't expected that reaction from him. She knew she didn't look hideous in the get-up, but she still felt self-conscious. A part of her wanted to cross her arms, shield herself from his eyes, but another part felt emboldened, even powerful. His lust made her heady and slick. Intoxicated, she almost forgot where they were or what they were doing.

Until the large Grandfather clock in the hall outside their door chimed, bringing them both back to Earth.

"Go on," he rasped. "James is waiting."

"What about you?"

He looked down at his crotch. "I need a few minutes before I parade myself around the house."

"Right ... wait, I don't know where to go."

Jeff's face twisted, prompting her to wonder if he was in actual pain. "Take a right and go straight down the hallway to the final door. Can't miss it."

Rebecca nodded, forcing her feet to move, shuffling across the room. He grabbed her arm as she passed him. "Oh, what

the hell," he muttered, before crushing his mouth against hers.

Rebecca didn't have time to think, only to respond. She pushed herself against his body and he ground his crotch against hers. Only thin material separated his hard erection from her wet pussy, She knew that if he pushed that thin material out of the way, she wouldn't stop him. She longed to do it herself.

"I want you. Right now," he moaned against her mouth.

"Me too," she whimpered, moving her hips against his.

"But ... not like this..." He took her shoulders, gently pushed her away.

Rebecca blinked, suddenly cold. Humiliation washed over her. What had made him push her away? What had made her react the way she did? She would have fucked him in the middle of the room, and she wouldn't have felt the least bit sorry about it. And that made her stomach churn.

"Like this?" She asked.

He waved his hand around. "This. Here. Now. It's not a good time."

Her fogged mind and heated blood disagreed with his assessment. "I ... I guess we better go..."

Jeff nodded, opening the door. Self-conscious and distracted, Rebecca trailed behind him as he led her to the kitchen. She couldn't help but notice his tight ass, the right size and shape for her hands, and the way his thighs flexed as he walked. Even his back and neck, unremarkable in every way, fascinated her.

James looked small, even insignificant standing in the middle of the massive, bustling kitchen. Tantalizing aromas of a veritable Christmas feast greeted them as they stepped into the room. Rebecca's stomach growled with appreciation. With wide eyes and a watering mouth, she examined the banquet in various stages of preparation. The appetizers were ready to serve, the succulent and elaborate main courses were roasting and simmering, and cookies, pies, and bread were cooling on the sidebar.

"This is enough food to feed an army."

James looked up with a smile. "Ah, there you are. It is a rather huge spread, isn't it? But I like to be prepared. Follow me."

They followed him to a small, converted utility closet off the side of the kitchen. She couldn't believe her eyes when he opened the door. It wasn't unlike the adult toy store she had visited once or twice before, in terms of the breadth and depth of items available. She recognized most of the items—dildos, vibrators, cockrings, whips, cuffs, lube—but a few exotic toys perplexed her.

"During the first part of the evening," James started, addressing Rebecca, "you'll be serving food. I don't need to tell you what to do, of course. Jeff will be seeing to people's drinks. After everybody's done, you'll be serving..." James motioned to the shelves surrounding them and smiled.

Rebecca nodded. "Right."

"Now, there's not any real order you should stick to. If my guests need anything, they'll likely flag you down and make a request. Everything in here is clearly labeled and should be

easy to find. There are two things that should be on your tray at all times. This bowl of condoms," he lifted a large bowl off the table, "and this bowl of lubricants."

"Got it. Where will everybody be? I mean ... am I going to be wandering around the house blindly?" Rebecca asked, not keen on that possibility.

"Not at all. Everybody will be in one of two areas. There's a playroom on the first floor and a dungeon in the basement. If anybody retires to the bedrooms, then they are on their own. Jeff will be helping you. Any questions?" James asked.

"Will I be paid in cash?" Rebecca asked. It might be crass to talk about money in such blunt terms, but she needed to know.

"Of course." James picked up a riding crop, toying with the end. "And you'll be compensated if the party runs longer than expected, but I imagine most people will retire to their rooms long before dawn. Now, if you'll excuse me, my guests will be arriving soon."

He bowed, slid passed them, and shut the door. "This is quite the collection, isn't it?" Rebecca said, struggling to sound casual.

"It gets bigger every year."

"How long have you been working for him?"

"This is only my second year as a bartender ... but I haven't always worked for him."

Rebecca frowned. "You mean ... you used to come here as a quest?"

"Of course." He picked up a dolphin-shaped vibrator, holding it up to the light. "This is ... interesting." He grinned. "Wanna try it?"

Rebecca ignored his question. "Of course? Well, why aren't you a guest this year?"

"You have to be in a committed relationship to get an invitation to this party. Once my fiancé split, I was no longer eligible." He replaced the vibrator, moving on to the biggest dildo she had ever seen. "Do you think anybody actually uses this?"

"You were engaged? Somebody wanted to marry you?"

"Why is that so shocking? Anyway, she came to her senses, obviously."

"So ... what is it like?"

"Being engaged?"

"No, the party."

Jeff shrugged. "Fun, I guess. A nice way to get through a cold, winter night."

"Is it like one big orgy?"

"Sometimes. Why? Do you wish you could participate?" Jeff asked.

"No \dots no \dots of course not \dots I was just curious about what to expect."

Jeff winked. "I bet you are."

The room had seemed large when they first entered, but now the walls closed around her. Rebecca's chest tightened. Only a yard separated her from his hard body, hundreds of condoms were just inches from her hand, and she could think

of a way to use each toy in the room—even the frighteningly exotic ones.

"Don't you have to go get set up or something?" she asked, backing up against the table.

"Unfortunately, yes." He slid his eyes up and down her body like a caress.

"Well, don't let me stop you."

Jeff smiled, ducking out the door, leaving her alone, surrounded by phalluses. She was tempted to use one to relieve some of the pressure, but she didn't want to risk James or, God forbid, Jeff, opening the door and catching her. Instead, she squirmed, counted to ten, and tried to reason with her treacherous body. But she could still smell his skin and taste his hot mouth and feel his cock against her thigh, and nothing she did could change that.

Chapter Four

They were all normal people. Their normality shocked Rebecca. She expected half-naked, flamboyant, sleazy lunatics. The sort that would accost her with complete disregard for her privacy or personal space. Like Jeff, except with less charm. But she couldn't have been more wrong in her assessment.

All the guests arrived by ten. Rebecca couldn't help but smile at their warm greetings and exclamations of joy. They sounded so pleased, so genuine. She nearly dropped her tray of appetizers when she got her first look at the party. Many were in their 30s and 40s, and they all looked like somebody's well-dressed, pleasant, outgoing parents. They all smiled at her, introducing themselves as she passed.

Most of them seemed particularly pleased to see Jeff. Men and women alike kissed him and fawned over him and pulled him into their conversations, and Rebecca soon realized that he was one of them. They didn't see him as a hired hand. When they pulled up a chair for him at the dining table, Rebecca's heart sunk. She knew she'd be covering the entire party by herself.

A petite blonde with bright eyes and a wide smile drove that realization home when she settled on Jeff's lap before kissing him deeply. Rebecca reached around the kissing couple to the table in order to grab Jeff's dirty soup bowl, ignoring the unbelievable pang of jealousy in her chest. Jeff

looked up, catching her eyes. She could only see the upper part of his face, but she could still make out his grimace.

Rebecca smiled, heartened by his discomfort, continuing with her work. It occurred to her that the blonde might want to invite Jeff to join them after dinner, and how would she cope with that? It was bad enough that she'd be exposed to his naked, sweaty body—she could probably live with that. But she didn't want to see him with another woman. Just the thought of that repulsed her.

And that frightened her.

"He can fuck everybody in the room. Men and women," she said under her breath, as she passed into the kitchen for more bread. "On live TV, for all I care."

Her mind, distant and objective, was willing to buy her protest. Her body, a more important player in this game, saw it as a dismal lie.

"Who can fuck everybody in the room?" James asked from behind her.

Rebecca's cheeks reddened. "Nobody. I don't even know what I was saying."

"You were talking about Jeff, right?"

Rebecca grabbed several baskets and dishes of butter. "What's about Jeff?"

"If you're worried he won't pull his weight around here, you don't need to be. I know he's slacking off now, but I'll make sure he gets back to work," he assured her.

"That isn't ... Right. Thank you. I appreciate it."

"Now," James continued. "If you're jealous because all the other young ladies are getting attention and he's ignoring you..."

"I'm not..."

"Don't worry about that either," James cut in. "He's just an old friend."

"Well, everybody seems very friendly here."

James smiled. "Start serving the main course in about ten minutes. We'll be ready for you then. I'll send Jeff in to help."

Rebecca nodded, eying the platters of food. Even with two people working, it would take several minutes to serve everything. Why didn't he hire more than two people to work? She made a mental note to ask Jeff. Surely, James could afford a few extra hands.

Jeff entered the kitchen several minutes later and smiled. "Great party, huh?"

"Oh, it's a real treat," Rebecca answered. "I especially liked the part where you left me to do all the work."

"Hey, I'm here now, aren't I?"

"Well if you planned on participating, why didn't you tell James to hire somebody else? It's not fair to me, Jeff."

"I'm sorry. It looked like you had everything under control."

"Yeah, I bet you're real sorry," Rebecca muttered.

"So you didn't have everything under control? Why didn't you tell me you needed help?" He asked.

"I shouldn't have to tell you I need help, Jeff. You should just *be* helping me. That's what you're getting paid to do, right?"

Jeff responded by arranging the bowls of steamed vegetables on an oversized tray. Rebecca took her cue from his silence and did the same, sneaking glances at him from the corner of her eye. With his set jaw, his straight shoulders, and his narrowed eyes, he seemed angry. Rebecca could feel her blood pressure rising. Why should he be angry with her? She hadn't done anything wrong. *Well, screw him*.

They worked throughout dinner without speaking more than necessary. His aloofness irritated her. Did he behave this way every time somebody chastised him for being a lazy bum? She sensed some serious resentment the few times he glanced her way. Like it's my fault he has to work instead of enjoying the attention of beautiful women? I didn't make the rules here. She didn't make the rules and she didn't know why his attitude unsettled her, but it did.

Despite Jeff's manner, dinner went off without a hitch. Their timing as a team was perfect. Nobody at the table wanted for anything. Rebecca had to grudgingly admit that Jeff wasn't completely worthless, when he put his mind to work. Maybe he had some uses beyond his obvious, physical attributes.

Once they cleared dessert from the table, Rebecca hurried into the closet of sexual wonders to sort the items. She wanted to have everything in order and within reach the second she needed it. Serving food was always easy, because the kitchen staff was conscientious, even anal, about having the right items in the right order at the right time. Jeff surprised her by stepping into the room, closing the door

behind him. She had expected he would rather spend his spare time with his buddies.

"What are you doing?" He asked.

"Getting ready for the rest of the night."

"Why?"

"What do you mean, why? I want to be prepared."

"You're taking this way too seriously."

"He's paying me a lot of money to take this seriously."

"You just have to throw a few condoms at them, and they'll be happy," Jeff pointed out.

"Thanks. That's helpful."

"Are you mad at me?"

Rebecca stopped short, surprised by his question. She turned around, crossing her arms. "Why does it matter?"

"If it's about what happened earlier..."

"I already forgot about it."

"Which thing did you already forget about?" Jeff asked.

Rebecca frowned. "Which thing are you referring to?"

"Kissing Kate earlier tonight."

"Kate? You mean the blond chick?"

"That's the one."

Rebecca sniffed. "Why should I be angry about that?"

Jeff stepped towards her. "I thought you looked a little

jealous."

"I am not jealous of you or your flings," Rebecca stated.
"Not in the least."

"Really?" He crowded her against the shelf, blocking her escape route with his arm.

Rebecca stiffened. "Yes, really."

"So if you saw me doing this..." He bent his head, softly kissing the corner of her mouth. "It wouldn't bother you?"

The hair on the back of her neck stood on end. "No."

He ran his hand down her arm, caressing her bare skin, and folded his fingers in hers. He brought her hand up to his mouth, kissing each knuckle, looking at her from beneath his thick lashes. She watched him without blinking, unable to tear her eyes away from his heavy gaze.

"How 'bout this?" Jeff kissed her wrist, his mouth warm against the sensitive skin. He rested his lips against her pulse point, and it hammered an erratic rhythm, betraying her real feelings.

"None of my business," Rebecca insisted.

He put her hand against his chest, closing the space between them. For the second time that night, she felt his cock grow against her thigh, and she couldn't ignore her own reaction. With weak knees, she resisted the urge to lean against his hard body and wrap her arms around his neck.

Jeff tilted his head towards her, bypassing her mouth, instead tickling her ear with his warm breath. "What if I cornered somebody in a quiet room and told them how much I wanted them?"

"It depends," she said, as calmly as possible. "What would you say?" Rebecca couldn't see his smile, but she could feel it. She held her breath, waiting for his response.

"Good question. I think I would say ... and this is a direct quote, you understand..."

Rebecca nodded.

"Good, I would say I want to fuck you. I want to screw you into the wall as hard as I can. I want to hear you shout my name until your throat hurts, and then I want to do it again. I want to see your body, naked and sweaty and flushed, beneath mine. I want to make you come and..."

Rebecca held up her hand, almost breathless and heady from his words. "OK, OK, I get the picture."

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"You sure?"
"Yes, oh, yes..."
"So?"
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Rebecca blinked. "So what?"

Jeff leaned back and looked her in the eye again. "Would that make you jealous?"

Rebecca opened her mouth to deny it, but the words wouldn't travel pass her dry lips. Despite herself, she nodded slowly.

Jeff moaned. "I can't take it anymore. You drive me crazy. You've been making me crazy since the first night, when you chased Sindy away..."

Rebecca didn't know if it was his words or his tone that made her blood rush from her head to her groin. She knew nobody had ever talked to her like that before—blunt and honest and perfect. She knew it could be a trick. Didn't the devil use flattery? She found that she didn't care.

Jeff reached between them, pulling his cock out of his briefs. She bit her lip to keep from whimpering as he rubbed the tip against her damp panties. The wall of toys and dildos and lube and condoms mocked her hesitation. What was she

so afraid of? Feeling good? Having fun? Losing herself for a moment?

With her free hand, she grabbed the back of his neck and pulled his mouth down to hers. The first contact with his dry, coaxing lips unlocked the remains of her inhibitions and sent them soaring out of reach. The world narrowed to him and the way he tasted and the way her skin burned and her clit throbbed.

A heavy knock on the door pulled them apart.

"We've got to stop doing this at work," Jeff muttered.

Rebecca thought that was the most reasonable thing he had ever said.

"Rebecca? Jeff?" James called.

"We'll be right out," Jeff answered without taking his eyes off her.

"Great. The fun is beginning."

"We should go," Rebecca said, but she didn't move.

"Come home with me tonight."

"What?"

"Come home with me tonight." Jeff smiled and it made his eyes dance. "Let me take you to bed."

Reality and fantasy tore at Rebecca, stretching her in two different directions. He could sweep her off her feet in a house like this, a modern day castle, when they were both half-naked and surrounded by reminders of pleasure she hadn't experienced in a very long time. But once they left the enchantment created by beautiful people and their beautiful lives, could she really turn her mind off and surrender her body to him?

She didn't know, so she didn't answer. She pushed against his chest until she had room to step around him, grabbing her tray for the first round.

"Is that a yes?" He asked.

Rebecca shrugged as she pushed the door open. "I'll think about it."

"That doesn't sound very encouraging," he observed.

"I'll think about it," she repeated as she stepped out of the room and turned her back on him.

* * * *

Rebecca did think about it. A lot. She thought about it as she side-stepped naked, writhing couples and trios stretched out on plush sofas and fat pillows. She watched men eating out women, enthusiastically licking their pussies and sucking on their clits, and thought about Jeff's wicked mouth. She had no doubt he would go down on her, and she didn't doubt he would be very good at it.

A part of her believed that Jeff would be good at anything he attempted. That part of her wanted to track him down and jump him before either one of them had the chance to think about it.

Her mouth watered as she watched women suck cock. She liked to give head. Just the thought of it made her juices flow. The thought of making Jeff whimper with delight and need made her weak. She could bring him to his knees while she was on hers, and she would love every second of it. She longed for it.

The sounds, the smells, of sex made her body tingle and her skin crawl. She wanted to touch them all, to feel their soft, hot flesh, their slick skin. And she wanted to be touched. She never smoked pot with her friends in high school, but always she got high from their second hand smoke, and now the same unexpected, heady, disconnected sensation overtook her. She floated from room to room, dazed.

She blushed every time she spotted Jeff. The party clearly had the same effect on him. His briefs hid very little. If anything, the thin material accentuated the stiff length of his erection, making it more difficult to ignore. Rebecca knew he would come to her if she nodded at him. The slightest interest would bring him running.

As the guests lost themselves in each other and the pleasures of the flesh, it became apparent to Rebecca that she was no longer needed. As James predicted, they all gradually drifted away to more private quarters where locked doors kept the servers and their curious eyes at bay. But that didn't make the heated pressure building in her body any more bearable.

When Jeff motioned her into the kitchen, she knew the softest touch would make her shatter. The unexpected warmth of the room startled her, making her want to pull the skimpy clothes from her perspiring body.

"It's time to go," he told her thickly.

"It is?"

Jeff held up a white envelope. "This is your half."

"It's ... thicker than I expected."

"James can be very generous. Do you want to change?"

Her breath came in quick, short gasps. "I think it's best if we just leave."

He nodded. "I'll go get our stuff then."

"I'll pull the car around front ... I need some air..."

"I'll see you out front then." He walked away, but she didn't move. She just watched the way his muscles moved and flexed as he walked. She couldn't make her legs cooperate until he was out of sight.

Rebecca didn't even realize she had left her purse inside until she reached her car. She stared dumbly at the locked door, trying to remember where her keys were, but even the sharp mountain air couldn't clear her foggy brain. She stared at the car until she heard Jeff's steps on the gravel driveway.

"You forget this?" He asked, holding her purse up.

"Yeah, I guess so..." She smiled, reaching for it.

"Are you sure you can drive? You look a little drunk."

"I didn't have a drop to drink." Rebecca fumbled with the keys, her fingers numb. "I'm fine." She inserted the key into the lock, turning it triumphantly. "Ah ha. Get in the car."

Once they were both settled, Rebecca tried to guide the keys into the ignition, but she kept missing the slot. Jeff gently put his hand over hers and held her fingers. "Wait a minute."

"What?"

"I think we both need to relieve a bit of tension..."

"Here?" Rebecca didn't disagree, but she didn't want to have sex in the front seat of her car. For one thing, she didn't have a big front seat. It wouldn't be comfortable.

"Just ... let me..." He put his hand on her stomach and slid his fingers beneath her panties. Realizing his intentions, she spread her legs to give him easier access. She needed it, she needed him to touch her. She needed to feel his rough, clever fingers.

As soon as his fingertips brushed her clit, she gasped and tensed, but she didn't forget to return the favor. Rebecca pushed his underwear aside and gripped his cock, wrapping her fingers around his shaft and pumping her wrist rapidly.

Rebecca closed her eyes, concentrating on the firm weight of his cock in her hand, and the desire to wrap her lips around his shaft hit her again. She fantasized about reclining his seat and sucking him off right there in the driveway, unconcerned about who might see her.

"Faster," she encouraged. "God..."

"Yes ... like that..." His breath whistled through his teeth and he bucked his hips, pushing hard against her hand.

Rebecca imagined his engorged cock thrusting into her, separating her slick flesh, filling her, and it was enough to ignite a sharp, sizzling flare of pleasure. The orgasm knocked the breath from her lungs. A low, guttural moan escaped her throat. Jeff jerked at the sound and came in her hand, groaning her name.

They both leaned back in their seats. Sanity struck Rebecca when she held her hand up to the light. "I need something to wipe this up," she muttered.

Jeff reached into the backseat for his shirt. He handed it to her silently and she wiped the come from her palm. She tossed the shirt behind her seat before turning the ignition.

Her hand was no longer shaking, her mind no longer cloudy, and her body no longer rebelling.

Rebecca couldn't think of anything to say to him on the way down the mountain, so she refrained from speaking entirely. She could sense his expectation. She knew he thought she'd be retiring with him to his apartment. She didn't know how to tell him she changed her mind.

"Are you coming up?" He asked when she pulled to a stop in front of his building.

"No."

"No?"

"I can't..." Rebecca started.

"Why not?"

"I've got things to do tomorrow."

"I'm not going to take you prisoner."

"Look, you need to find another ride for tomorrow."

Jeff sighed. "Great, what the hell happened? I thought we were getting along, and all of a sudden you're giving me the cold shoulder? And now you want me to have to scramble for a ride at the last minute?"

"I promised I'd visit my father, remember?" Rebecca said.

"Oh. Oh, right. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have snapped ...

again." Jeff sighed. "I'm just a real winner tonight, aren't I?"

"Just ... can you cover for me with Mike? He'll be less likely to get angry if he hears the news from you instead of me."

"Yeah, sure. I'll talk to him tomorrow."

Rebecca looked down at the steering wheel. "Thanks."

"What time are you leaving tomorrow to see your dad?"

"Probably around six. Why?"

"Just wondering."

"Jeff ... look ... I'm really sorry about tonight. About everything. I shouldn't have ... I mean, I let myself get carried away and I don't think it's fair that..."

Jeff held up his hand. "Hey, you don't have to apologize to me. I know what it feels like to get carried away."

She smiled. "OK."

"Rebecca, I want to ask you a question."

"Shoot."

"Will you let me take you to dinner?"

Rebecca's eyebrows shot up. "Dinner? Do you mean you want to take me out on a date?"

Jeff fidgeted with the lock on the door. "Yes. An honest-to-goodness date."

"I ... I don't know..."

"When was the last time you went out and had a little fun?" Jeff asked.

"I don't know."

"Exactly. Just one date. That's all I ask."

Rebecca snorted. "That's not all you ask for. Not by a long shot."

"It's all I ask for now. We can go tomorrow night."

Rebecca bit her lip and hoped she wouldn't regret her decision. She didn't know how he planned to get the night off, but it wasn't her concern. He was the Golden Boy, after all. "Yeah, OK. Tomorrow night."

Jeff leaned over, kissing her cheek. "Great. I'll call you tomorrow, OK?"

Rebecca nodded, feeling a surge of excitement as Jeff exited the car. A real date? Did she even know how to do that anymore? Jeff undoubtedly had ulterior motives, but then, so did she. It would be nice to spend time with him outside of the work environment.

The promise of seeing him at the end of the day, and allowing him a few kisses, would be enough to get her through the long, painful visit with her father. She'd move the sun and the moon for her daddy, but, each time she visited, it seemed she spent more and more time with a stranger.

Chapter Five

Rebecca hurried around her apartment the next morning, struggling to get herself put together and on the road in time. The last thing Rebecca expected to hear was a quick rap on her door. She pulled her shoes on and grabbed her purse, intent on getting rid of the visitor as quickly as possible. She was already running a bit behind, and she had no interest in buying Girl Scout cookies, subscribing to magazines, or finding Jesus.

"What?" she snapped, pulling the door open.

Jeff smiled. "I'm glad I caught you."

"What are you doing here?" she asked, annoyed. "How did you get over to my place anyway? How do you even know where I live?"

"I asked Julia. And I took a cab."

"Julia just handed out my address? Did she give you my social security number too?"

"No, it took a bit of convincing. And you don't need to sound so excited to see me."

Rebecca stepped out of her apartment, closing the door behind her. "Look, I'm in a hurry. So, what do you want? If it's about tonight, you could have called."

"It's not about tonight."

Rebecca locked the door. "OK, great. What's it about?"

"I wanted to come with you," Jeff answered.

"Come with me where?" Rebecca hurried down the hall and didn't check to see if he followed her.

"To visit your father."

She stopped short. "You want to come with me to visit my father? Why?"

Jeff put a gentle hand on her shoulder. "I knew it might be difficult for you, and I thought maybe I could help."

Rebecca's first instinct was to push his hand away and tell him to get lost. Who did he think he was? She hadn't invited him or given any indication that she wanted him there, or that she wanted him to meet her father. How would she introduce him anyway? Hi Dad, this is Jeff, the guy I want to fuck?

But curiosity defeated that impulse. "If you're just doing this to win points..."

"Well, if I was trying to win points, would I?"

Rebecca grinned. "Maybe a few."

Jeff shook his head. "Look, I think it's important to support friends and..."

"Wait, we're friends now?"

"Aren't we?"

Rebecca checked her watch. "I don't have time to talk about this now. Come on."

"Great."

"Did you talk to Mike?" She asked when they reached the elevator.

"It's all taken care of. I told him I was coming down with something, and you deserved the night off," Jeff informed her.

Rebecca couldn't help her smile. "You mean you lied for me?"

The doors closed and they descended. "Well, you were right. Mike is more inclined to forgive me. I mean, he wasn't exactly happy, but nobody is going to lose their job."

Rebecca studied Jeff's face as though she had never seen him before. A born charmer, good-looking, and sexy, she couldn't deny that. But it never occurred to her to add thoughtful, kind, or considerate to the description. *Now*, she wondered, *can I add genuine?*

The elevator chimed and its doors opened. She couldn't help but question what else about him she had missed as he followed her out of the building to her car. It never occurred to her that the man had levels, and maybe even honest intentions. *Maybe*.

"I just need to make one quick stop," she said as they pulled out of the driveway.

"Where?"

"Albertson's. He likes the chocolate chip cookies they make at the bakery."

"Oh. If I had known, I would have picked up some this morning when I did my shopping."

"Yeah, well, I guess you can't be perfect all the time."

"But I sure can try."

"I see." Rebecca pulled into the grocery store's lot and parked. "I'll just be a few seconds. Hopefully."

"I'll wait."

Rebecca ordered a dozen of the fresh cookies without trouble in the surprisingly empty store. When she returned to the car five minutes later with her prize, she noticed a marked difference in Jeff's demeanor. Surprised and a little

uncertain, she didn't know if she should ask about it or leave him alone.

Jeff solved her dilemma himself by announcing, "I never really knew my father."

Rebecca blinked, unsure of how she should response. "Oh?"

"I was just thinking about it, you know. About all the years..." Jeff shook his head. "Never mind, it's stupid."

"It's not stupid," Rebecca said softly. "I mean, if you want to talk about it."

"Memory is a funny thing, isn't it? I mean, I think I remember my dad, but it could just be some guy I saw once."

"Did your mom raise you by herself?"

"She remarried when I was ten. My step-dad adopted me and, you know, he's a great guy. I probably couldn't ask for a better father. But sometimes I wonder..."

"That's probably natural."

"What's your dad like?" Jeff asked.

Rebecca swallowed, turning the question over in her mind. How could she describe the man who took her fishing every weekend and taught her how to fix cars and beamed when she descended the stairs in her blue silk prom dress?

"He's a friend," she finally said. "I mean, he's everybody's friend. He can find common ground with anybody he meets. I've never heard him say an unkind word about anybody. He avoids fights and acrimony ... that used to drive my mom crazy. She didn't pick fights or anything, but even heated discussions would scare him off."

"How long were they married?"

"Thirty-eight years. But they grew up together. Her father was the pastor and his mother was the choir director at the only church in their town, so they spent a lot of time together as children," Rebecca explained as she navigated the 110 Freeway. "They spent some time apart, she went to college, and he fought in Korea. Apparently Mom didn't want to get married, and it took Dad almost a decade to convince her. He said she was worth the wait."

"So she's always been a part of his life, one way or the other?"

Rebecca nodded. "Now he doesn't know what to do with himself. And I don't know how to help."

"Can you imagine loving anybody like that? Being that dedicated to another human being?"

Rebecca's mouth curled into a small smile. "Yes, but only because I've witnessed it. Here we are."

"That didn't take long."

"No, fortunately traffic was light."

Golden Acres, a small, assisted living community just outside of Pasadena, offered a closed community, activities, and even day trips throughout southern California. She had chosen it after long and painful consideration, when her father refused to offer any opinion one way or the other. She'd hated making that decision for him, but he seemed happy. For the most part.

"He'll be waiting for us by the pool. It's his favorite spot," Rebecca explained as she led Jeff through the complex. "He likes the sun."

Rebecca smiled when she rounded the corner and saw him near the edge of the pool in a familiar green chair. From a distance, he looked happy and normal. His mind might be slipping, but his body was still strong. She knew he could be leading a happy, full life if things were different. There was no reason why he couldn't travel, like he always wanted to do. She couldn't help but feel responsible for his current state. Maybe if she had more time with him, she could do something to make his life better.

He stood when he saw them, his smile matching hers. "Becky, my girl! Henry said you'd be coming today."

"Henry's never wrong, is he?" Rebecca said, holding her arms open. Her father embraced her tightly.

"You look just like your mother," he murmured.

"I brought cookies," she said, holding up the bag when he released her.

"Chocolate chip?"

"Just like you like."

He nodded over her shoulder. "And who is this young man."

"Dad, this my ... um ... friend, Jeff. Jeff, this is my dad, Paul."

The two men shook hands and Paul smiled. "Good to meet you. I'm glad to see Rebecca meeting new people. I try to tell her she works too hard, but she doesn't listen to her old dad. Here, have a seat. It's a lovely day, isn't it?"

"It's beautiful," Jeff agreed. "It's hard to believe Christmas is just a few days away."

"Well, you know the best part of living in California is that you don't have to shovel rain," Paul said, taking the cookies from Rebecca as he settled in his char. "Cookie?"

"I hear that. Thanks." Jeff smiled.

Rebecca pulled up a seat between the two of them. "How have you been feeling today, Dad?"

"Fine, just fine. Got sunshine and my girl, what else do I need?"

Rebecca decided not to mention the phone call from the day before. She didn't want to remember it and she was sure he didn't need a reminder. "Cookies?"

"Yes, that too. So, Jeff, tell me a little about yourself."

Jeff's eyes darted to Rebecca and she nodded. She wanted to spend some quiet time with her dad, but he seemed so interested and alert. Anything that made his eyes snap with laughter made her happy, even if that meant spending the afternoon listening to him question Jeff.

"Well, I work part-time as a bartender. That's how I met Rebecca. We work for the same catering company."

"You only work part-time? What do you do all day?"

"Dad," Rebecca said, aghast. "I don't think that's any of your business..."

Jeff laughed. "It's a good question. The pay is good and it gives me a chance to pursue my other interests and hobbies."

Paul nodded, apparently pleased. "It's smart to take the time to do you what you love. I don't know why everybody gets caught up in the crazy rat race like it all matters. Nothing matters, you know, except doing what you love."

"I think that's very true."

"Of course, it's true."

Rebecca touched Paul's arm. "Dad, do you mind if I run in and grab a drink?"

He waved his hand. "The door's unlocked."

"Do you want anything?"

"Some water, I think."

Rebecca nodded, standing up. "Jeff?"

"No, I'm good. Thanks."

"I'll be right back then."

As she walked away, she heard Paul say, "So, what are your intentions towards my daughter?" She slowed her pace, hoping to hear Jeff's answer, but his voice was too low. Rebecca decided she'd ask Jeff the question herself later that night.

She went directly to the front office, bypassing Paul's apartment. Through the window, she could see Henry sitting at his desk, idly chewing on a pencil as he studied a paper in front of him. She tapped on the glass and he waved her in.

"Ahh, Rebecca, I'm glad to see you made it. Where's Paul?"

"He's still at the pool, with Jeff."

"Jeff?"

"A friend of mine. He wanted to come with me today, and I thought it wouldn't hurt to have him meet Dad."

"Just a friend?" Henry asked with a wink.

She rolled her eyes. "Yes. So, what happened yesterday after we got off the phone?"

Henry shook his head. "Nothing, really. He calmed down by dinner time and by the time I walked him to his apartment, he was in good spirits again."

"Tell me honestly, Henry, do you think it would be better if he lived with me?"

"Here, have a seat." Henry perched on the edge of his desk, removing his glasses. "I know your situation, and I'm not going to tell you that you're doing anything wrong. In fact, you're doing everything you can. That's important. But I will say that if we lived in a perfect world, then Paul would be living with his family. He's got friends here, and he's got me, but he's lonely."

Rebecca nodded. "I wish we lived in that perfect world. This is killing me."

"Don't be too hard on yourself. Hey, what are your plans for Christmas?"

"I wanted to get out of town and take Dad somewhere nice, but I don't think that'll happen. I definitely plan on spending Christmas Eve and Christmas Day with him."

"It won't matter what you do, then."

"Well, he's waiting for me. I just wanted to make sure that he was doing OK."

"You know I'll call you if there are any changes."

Rebecca stood up and smiled. "What about you? What are you doing for Christmas?"

"I'll be here, of course. Not everybody here is lucky enough to have a daughter like you. We always have a huge Christmas dinner."

"You're a good man, Henry."

"I do what I can." He wrapped his arm around her shoulder in a friendly hug. "That's all you can do, right?"

"Right."

Rebecca smiled as she stepped out of the office, relieved. She still had doubts and more than a little guilt, but she always felt better after talking to Henry. After a quick detour into Paul's apartment for the water, she found the two men exactly where she left them, engaged in a lively conversation punctuated by laughter.

"There you are," Paul greeted. "We thought you got lost."

"I hope Jeff hasn't been boring you," Rebecca said.

Paul took a swallow of the offered water with a grin. "No, no, of course not. Jeff's a fine young man."

"Oh, really? What were you guys talking about?"

"Nothing," Paul answered quickly.

"Nothing? I heard you."

Jeff waved his hand and his grin matched Paul's. "Nothing important. Just guy stuff."

"Just guy stuff?" She arched an eyebrow. "Should I be worried?"

"So, Becky, what are we having for Christmas dinner?" Paul asked.

"Turkey, I guess."

Paul and Jeff looked at each other and then guffawed.

Rebecca frowned, confused. "What? What's so funny?"

Jeff shook his head, but he couldn't force any words past his laughter.

Rebecca's eyes widened. "You told him, didn't you?"

"I'm sorry, Becky," Paul gasped. "It just came up and..." He wiped the corner of his eye and sipped his water. "You have to admit, it's pretty funny."

"Did the turkey really fly across the yard?" Jeff asked.

"It's not funny," Rebecca muttered.

"Right out the window!" Paul exclaimed. "It nicked my cheek as it went by. I can still feel it."

"You know, this is still a painful memory for me," Rebecca said, her own mouth twisting into a smile at the memory. "I ruined Christmas that year."

"Oh, it wasn't entirely your fault," Paul assured her. "But, man, who knew cooked birds could get such distance?"

"Well, you don't have to worry. None of the food I've cooked recently has gone airborne—intentionally," she promised. "Now, what other embarrassing stories have you told while I was gone?"

"That's all," Paul said. "Though I promised Jeff to show him all the home movies."

"No!"

Jeff laughed. "Why not? They sound great."

"Yeah, because you're not the featured star."

"She wanted to be a movie star," Paul said. "She loved to be in front of the camera."

"Well, I'm sure we've bored Jeff enough..." Rebecca tried to cut in.

"Nonsense. This is the most fun I've had in..." Jeff caught her eye and winked. "Well, in awhile."

"Actually," Paul said, standing up. "I have to cut this short."

Rebecca jumped to her feet. "Why? Is there something wrong?"

"Wrong? No, no, not at all. I'm actually meeting a few people for dinner..."

"Really?"

Paul nodded. "A lovely couple has invited me over to their apartment tonight. It turns out we all went to the same school."

Rebecca smiled. "That's great."

"Why don't you walk me to my door?" Paul said.

Rebecca handed her keys to Jeff. "I'll meet you out in the car."

Jeff nodded, offering his hand to Paul. "It's been a real pleasure meeting you, sir."

"The pleasure's been mine. Come by and visit me again sometime."

"You can count on that."

Rebecca watched the exchange, bemused. Paul put his arm around her shoulder and led her away from the pool. "Come on, little girl, let's chat."

"Chat? About what?"

"I think it's great that you've finally found someone."

"Someone? You mean Jeff? We're not ... I mean ... we just work together."

"He really likes you," Paul said. "My daddy would have said that that young man is smitten."

Rebecca blushed. "Smitten?"

"You could do worse."

"Hardly a ringing endorsement."

"Just promise me something, will you?" Paul said. He stopped and put his hands on her shoulders. "Will you?" "Anything, Daddy."

"I know you've been working yourself into the ground. I know you've been busy. And you know I hate to see you this way."

Rebecca shook her head. "What way?"

"You're exhausted. You've always taken on too much. You don't know your own limits."

"Dad, you don't need to worry about me. I'm an adult now."

"You'll always be my little girl, and I'll always worry about you. But I want you to promise me that you'll go out with that young man and you'll have a good time, OK?"

"Are you insisting I go on a date? This from the man who used to threaten every boy who looked my way?"

Paul smiled and began walking again. "You're a good kid."

"I'll be here early on Christmas Eve. Maybe around one."

"Yeah, that sounds good."

"Is there anything you need?" Rebecca asked outside his door. "I can run to the store or something."

"I'm good. I just went to the store yesterday with Henry."

Rebecca wrapped her arms around him, burying her head against his shoulder. "I miss you, you know."

"I miss you, too." He kissed the top of her head. "Now go on. Jeff's waiting to take you out dancing."

"Dancing? Did he tell you that?" Rebecca asked, stepping back.

"I told him. Now go on."

"Merry Christmas, Dad."
Paul winked. "Bah, humbug."
"I'll see you in a few days. Love you."
"Love you, too."

Rebecca felt his eyes on her as she hurried down the walk to the parking lot. She knew he would watch her until she was out of sight. He always did.

Chapter Six

Rebecca parked in front of Jeff's apartment and checked her make-up in the rear-view mirror. After they had left her father, Jeff insisted that she drop him off, go home, and get ready for a night out on the town. They arranged to meet at eight, but she was so eager and nervous that she arrived a full thirty minutes early. It didn't surprise her to see Jeff was already outside, waiting.

"You're a bit early," he greeted when he opened the door.

"But you were waiting."

"I'm an impatient guy."

"So..."

"Do you wanna go upstairs for a drink?" Jeff invited.

"A drink?" Rebecca nodded. "Yeah, that'd be great."

"You can park right over there," he said, pointing to a few empty slots at the far end of the lot. "That's visitor's parking."

"Um ... where are we going tonight?" Rebecca had a hard time forming the question, because she really didn't care where they went.

"Do you like Mexican food?"

"Who doesn't?" She parked the car, glancing at his strained face. "I really need a drink."

He opened the door. "What do you like?"

"I don't care. I'm sure you have a great selection."

Jeff grinned. "A good selection, at least. Follow me." He added over his shoulder, "You look very pretty."

Her lips twitched. "You don't look too shabby yourself."

She was accustomed to seeing him in his uniform—a white shirt and black slacks—and he somehow made it look like an expensive, tailored suit. She had seen him in nothing except the barest silk briefs, but even that couldn't hold a candle to the tailored slacks and rich red silk shirt. He wore the expensive clothes like a second skin. She almost felt scruffy in comparison.

Jeff used his key to open the lobby door, ushering her in. He put his hand on the small of her back, guiding her through the festively decorated lobby, and Rebecca realized that if she reached the elevator, there would be no turning back. Nothing they had done before was as solid, as certain, as this simple act. A quick hand-job in the car? It could be forgotten, ignored, left in the past. Meeting her father? She's introduced several friends to her father. It was hardly a commitment.

But stepping into the elevator with him would change everything.

"What floor do you live on?" She asked to kill the silence.

"The tenth."

"Oh." So it would be a very short ride.

Jeff pushed the up button and the doors opened immediately. It looked like every elevator she had ever seen, but it looked bigger, and smaller, and darker. He gently pushed her through the doorway, the doors sliding shut behind her.

"I've been waiting to get you upstairs for a long time," he said in a low voice.

Rebecca took a deep breath, trying to think of a snappy reply, but she knew she had been waiting for a long time for

his invitation. The walls pushed in around them as the elevator crawled to the tenth floor.

"It's hot in here," she commented. "Don't you think it's hot?"

Jeff nodded, unbuttoned the top of his shirt, and loosened his tie. "What's taking so long?"

Rebecca watched the light on the top of the door flash from five to six. "Maybe the vent's closed or something..."

"Maybe."

The light flashed for the ninth floor and Rebecca caught her breath. Seconds later, the doors slid open and they both looked at the long corridor stretching before them.

"My place is just down here..." He said, motioning her forward.

"How long have you lived here?"

"A few years now. It's a pretty nice place."

"Do you have good neighbors?"

"I suppose I can't complain." He paused outside the door marked 1013, pulling his keys from his pocket. "They're quiet and polite..." He smiled over his shoulder. "But the folks on either side of me work nights."

"Oh?"

"They're already gone."

"Does that mean you have to be quiet during the day?"

"I try not to be home during the day." Jeff pushed the door open. "Ladies first."

Nothing about his apartment shocked her. It seemed to be the standard bachelor pad. A large-screen plasma television dominated the living room, flanked on either side by tall

speakers. The walls were covered by books, DVDs, and CDs. She longed to peruse his library, but he motioned towards the plush, leather sofa and invited her to have a seat.

"What will you have?" he asked, once she settled on the couch.

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"Um ... what are you having?"
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Rebecca watched him pour two drinks from a very well stocked bar. She could see the pulse pounding at his throat, and he had a minor twitch in his jaw. She also noticed the whiteness of his knuckles as he clutched the bottle of amber liquid.

Rebecca stood up without thought and crossed the small room to him. Jeff held out her glass, and as she took it from him, their fingers brushed. A sharp bolt of electricity raced up her arm. She brought the drink up to her mouth, hoping the alcohol would calm her nerves and settle her stomach.

The liquor made her mouth tingle and burned her throat. Heat spread in her chest and fire erupted in her stomach. Her head started to spin. She put the glass down with numb fingers and her chest rose and fell rapidly. She watched in an odd, detached way as she reached out and put her hand on his arm. He covered her fingers with his, holding her in place, and shuffled towards her, closing the short distance between them.

[&]quot;Scotch."

[&]quot;Sounds good."

[&]quot;You sure?"

[&]quot;Sure."

Rebecca tilted her head back, watching him move in slowmotion. Everything seemed slow and hazy until their lips actually touched, and then the world erupted in movement and color. He tasted like Scotch and cinnamon, and she opened her mouth to him. She knew she wouldn't resist him. The battle had been decided, and, if they negotiated the treaty correctly, they'd both walk away winners.

Rebecca clawed at his shirt, mindlessly ripping at the buttons and his tie. Impatient and flustered, she couldn't stop her hungry fingers from seeking his solid chest and his hot skin. Jeff didn't seem to be hesitating, either. He pulled at her skirt until it fell to the floor at her feet. His pants soon joined her skirt.

Jeff lifted her off the floor and she wrapped her long legs around his waist. She tried to pull his cock from his boxers, but he pushed her hand away. "Not ... yet..."

"Yes, now," she insisted, fumbling with the thin cloth that separated them.

Jeff groaned and carried her to the couch. "Give me a second here..."

He put her down onto the cushions, and she ripped his boxers off without further ceremony. She wrapped her hand around his shaft and pumped it once, and then slid her palm over his head, skimming over the moist pre-come that glazed his skin. She brought her hand to her mouth and licked the salty liquid from it, watching him as her tongue moved over her skin. His cock jumped and his eyes narrowed.

"I have condoms in the bedroom," he rasped.

Rebecca spread her legs open and pushed her underwear aside. She slid the hand she'd used on him between her legs and pushed two fingers into her slick passage. He watched her movements with heavy eyes, entranced. She bucked against her hand, far too sensitive for this type of teasing. She could already feel her first orgasm building, and she knew it was a reaction to the heat in his gaze, the desire on his face.

"Hurry," Rebecca breathed. She pulled her fingers from her pussy and held them up to him. "I'm ready ... right now..."

Jeff grabbed her wrist and pulled her glistening fingers into his mouth, sucking on the skin, and rolling his tongue around her knuckles. Her stomach clenched and desire drenched the scrap of panties still in place and made her thighs slick. She wanted to tell him to forget about the condom. She wanted to shout, "Fuck me now. For the love of God!" But she bit her tongue until she felt the tangy taste of copper in her mouth to trap the words.

Jeff released her fingers and moved his mouth down her palm and wrist, using his teeth as well as his lips to tantalize and taste her skin. Rebecca eyed his erection, and it seemed to grow in front of her. *How big is he?* She thought, dazedly. Bigger than anybody she had been with before. She couldn't even think of a reference point for comparison. Her clit throbbed, her pussy ached, and her body thrummed with impatience.

"Please, Jeff..."

He kneeled in front of her and her eyes widened. "No, no ... bedroom. For the condom."

"Right now?"

She nodded frantically.

"But I thought I could do this first..." He dipped his head between her thighs and slid his tongue down her pussy lips.

Rebecca whimpered and buried her fingers in his hair. He tormented her with each flick of his tongue. She knew this wouldn't be enough to satisfy her. Even if he did make her orgasm, she would only want more. Need more. Much, much more. His actions were cruelly oblivious to her intensifying agony, and she writhed and bucked beneath him. He tried to hold her down with strong fingers buried in her flesh, but her need made her impossible to subdue.

"Oh, my God, stop!"

Jeff jumped back as if burned, his eyes wide and questioning. "What? What's wrong?"

Rebecca would have laughed at the fear and concern on his face, but she wasn't in a humorous mood. "Take me to bed..."

"You're so bossy," he protested, but he pulled her to her feet. He surprised her by lifting her off the floor again and tossing her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

"Hey!" She yelped. "What are you doing?"

"I'm taking you to bed."

"I didn't mean like this."

"You should have been more specific." He carried her down the hall and dumped her on the bed without ceremony. "Now, what do you want, Princess?"

"Get your condom." She didn't say *hurry up*, but she didn't have to.

Jeff pulled open the top dresser drawer and grabbed a handful of rubbers. He tossed all but one on the bed, opened it, and sheathed his manhood. "Now what?"

Rebecca spread her legs and held her arms out. "Come here."

"Well, I do like a woman who knows what she wants..." He knelt between her legs and grabbed her ankles. "You're all ready for me then?"

"Yes ... yes..."

Jeff brought her feet up until they were level with his shoulders and slammed into her without further warning or discussion. Lights erupted in front of her eyes until she had a hard time focusing on his face. Every nerve ending, every cell reacted, sending up a chorus of joy and relief. Her fingers and toes curled into the mattress.

He moved fast, slamming his hip forward in a hard and steady rhythm. Rebecca could feel every part of her adjust to accommodate him, feel her entire body opening to his. She closed her eyes, arched her back and moved against him, pulling and pushing. She clenched around him, her muscles contracting, quivering with the surprising force and size of his body.

Words and pleas and moans and shouts of satisfaction spilled from her mouth. She couldn't stop them or call them back. She was in flux, absorbing all the beauty and pleasure in the world until she thought she would burst, and at the same time, releasing all the lust and ecstasy. It all flowed into her, through her, around her, and back to him.

"Open your eyes," he demanded.

Rebecca opened them, but it seemed impossible to keep them from shutting again. It was like riding a roller coaster, and the force of the drop made her eyes slam shut for protection. He gripped her chin and repeated his request.

She tried again, and their eyes clashed and held. Brown sparked against green, and he smiled. "I want to see ... what you're feeling..."

Rebecca moaned and her body tightened. Every thrust increased the tension in her limbs until her muscles screamed for release. Jeff saw her discomfort as it distorted her face, and she nearly sobbed her thanks when he chose not to prolong the inevitable. He touched her clit, rubbing the sensitive, hard flesh between the pads of his fingers. Her body tensed and convulsed one final time as she climaxed.

"Christ ... Christ ... Christ..." She gasped, squirming and shuddering on his silk sheets. Almost as soon as the tension in her body abated, it began to crest again, building like the tide. Jeff pulled out of her and hesitated, the head of his cock against her hot opening.

"More?" He asked.

Rebecca nodded and braced herself. He pulled his hips back further and thrust into her, filling her completely. The head of his cock hit her g-spot directly and she bucked against him as another orgasm erupted in her body, heating her blood and sending sparks of light through her flesh until it all exploded again. She could feel him shudder, felt his muscles quiver, as he pushed into her one final time, and then let her legs fall.

Jeff fell to the side of the bed, careful to untangle her legs from his arms, and laughed. Rebecca rolled her head his direction and frowned. "What's so funny?"

"I've just never been with anybody so impatient. I mean, you wanted to bypass all the fun stuff..."

"There's plenty of time for that later."

"Well, there's a reason it's called foreplay."

"Are you complaining?"

Jeff held up his hands, shaking his head. "No, no, you'll get no complaints from me."

Her lips twitched, and her frowned turned into a smile. "Good."

Jeff carefully pulled the condom from his cock—still erect, Rebecca noted—and tossed it in the garbage can by the bed. "Do you still want to go out?"

Rebecca snorted. "No."

"I need to eat to keep my strength up."

Rebecca wrapped her hand around his shaft and gave it a soft tug. "You feel strong enough for me."

He laughed softly. "That's not what I meant."

"Well," she said, stroking him, "you did work awfully hard." Jeff nodded. "I did."

She hunted for a stray condom with her free hand, and her fingers finally closed over one. She held it up with a triumphant smile. "Think you can go again ... if I do most of the work?"

"If you do most of the work," he agreed.

Rebecca released him long enough to unwrap the condom and to slide it on his shaft. She straddled his waist and

hovered above his stiff cock, kissing him gently as she lowered herself onto him, and marveling at how much the contact thrilled her, even as her thighs and legs were still quivering from her last orgasm.

Jeff cupped her ass with both hands as she rocked. She deepened the kiss, exploring his mouth with her tongue, and making his lips pliant beneath hers. His bold, strong fingers flexed and relaxed as they moved steadily over her cheeks, sneaking closer to her crevice. She slid forward and back, forward and back, building a low flame, creating a smoldering friction between them, one that could ignite into a spectacular blaze without warning.

Rebecca didn't focus on that. She concentrated on his mouth and lips. The kiss evolved and became dynamic, moving past passion or lust, moving into depths of intimacy she had never explored before. She felt as if they were somehow melding, becoming a part of each other, like she could sink right through his flesh, like he could somehow surround her.

Distantly, she felt his fingers moving and exploring her ass, but it still sent cold chills of shock down her back when his index finger reached her puckered, tight ring of flesh, paused, and then pushed into her. He didn't break the kiss, but he seemed to be telling her to relax. Rebecca did so, gradually, as her body became accustomed to the intrusion. And when she did, she realized she had never felt anything like this before. Not like she did at that moment.

They had fucked just minutes before—and it had been nothing more than animalistic, base fucking—but at that

moment, she believed it had never happened. It was a distant memory that paled when held up against this. His strong body flexed and moved beneath her chest. She could feel his heart pounding and the rhythm reverberated through his muscles, echoed in her heart and in her muscles. His lips tasted familiar and exotic, his tongue plunging into her mouth. His cock filled her, stretched her muscles, until her body molded around his and tensed, holding him. His finger continued to move inside of her ... and he slipped a second one in and the shock and pleasure of that action intensified every endless second.

The blaze did come suddenly, moving as quickly and lethally as a wildfire. Rebecca screamed into his mouth, screamed his name, screamed her pleasure, screamed her relief. She tensed around him and felt him do the same, but she kept a bit of control over herself, liberating herself only when she felt him quiver, felt his body finally release.

Rebecca collapsed on him and rested her head on his shoulder. Jeff pulled his fingers away from her and his hand fell on her thigh. He smoothed his other hand down her hair and back, and then back up her spine. She wanted to stretch and purr, as content as a well-fed cat.

"You're something else, Rebecca Cooper. Anybody ever tell you that?"

"Honestly, no."

"What kind of fools have you been dating?"

Rebecca shook her head. "Especially when I could have been dating this fool the entire time."

His chest rumbled with silent laughter. "Indeed. Think of all the time we wasted."

"You mean the past week?"

"No ... no, much longer than that."

"I didn't even know you more than a week ago," she yawned.

"Oh, but I noticed you. Couldn't think of a way to get you to talk to me, though."

"Guess it's a good thing you lost your license then."

Jeff hesitated. "Yeah..."

Rebecca lifted her head and studied his face. "You did get your license suspended, right?"

Jeff answered by looking away.

Rebecca pushed away from him, unmindful of the sensitive bits she might have smashed, and rolled off the bed. "This was all a trick?"

"I wouldn't call it a trick."

"How did you get Mike to go along with it? Does he know the truth?"

"He's an old friend..." Jeff sat up and grabbed the sheet, pulling it over his hips. "Rebecca, please. I didn't mean to upset you. But every time I tried to get a moment with you, you ran away. I just wanted to spend some time with you."

"This is ... this is creepy! You're a creepy fuck."

Jeff rolled his eyes. "I'm not creepy. What was so awful about what I did?"

"You mean, what's so awful about lying to me? Jeff, how do I know that I can trust anything you say now? I could spend every minute with you, questioning every word you

say, everything you do. Is that what you want? Because that's not what I want. Not if I'm going to be with someone ... Unless..." Rebecca's face flushed with humiliation. "Unless you've got what you wanted."

Jeff jumped up and they stared each other down over the bed. "Rebecca, why would I go to all the trouble to get you into the sack? I'm not that hard up."

"I don't know. Why go to this much trouble at all? I mean, you hardly even know me now."

"That's not true. I know a great deal about you. You're an open person, Rebecca, even if you don't realize it," Jeff countered. "Answer me honestly. Can you say that before last week you never gave me a second thought? Can you tell me that you ignored my existence?"

"Of course, I can't. I mean, we worked together and I ... I just noticed you as a co-worker. That's all."

"Well," Jeff countered, "I noticed that you smell like apples and you have the softest lips and the prettiest smile I've ever seen."

Rebecca looked down at the rumpled bed. "You smell like gingersnaps," she muttered.

"What's that?"

"I noticed that you smell like gingersnaps and you have that flop of hair..." She wiped her own hair out of her eyes. "That flop of hair that always falls in your face."

Jeff smiled hesitantly. "So ... you don't hate me, then?" "You know, you really disrupted my life."

"I was just trying to make my own Christmas miracle."

Rebecca rolled her eyes. "You didn't think this Christmas miracle through very clearly. It could have backfired. It could still backfire."

"Do you want me to grovel?"

Rebecca's mouth twitched. "No. Well, maybe later."

Jeff circled the foot of the bed and approached her slowly, as though he expected her to bolt at any moment. Rebecca allowed him to wrap his arm around her, pulling her against his body. She tilted her head and allowed him to kiss her sensitive, swollen lips.

"I won't lie to you," he said against her mouth. "It was worth it. I'd do it all over again."

"You really should have tried to ask me out first."

"We both know that wouldn't have worked. You had to get to know what a charming and wonderful person I am through forced contact."

"You know, on second thought, I think you better take me out to dinner. A big dinner at a very expensive restaurant. A very, very expensive restaurant."

"Your wish is my command. If that's what it takes for you to forgive my duplicitous ways."

Rebecca smiled. "I've already forgiven you, but you should take me out to dinner anyway."

"Yes, ma'am." He slapped her ass gently before releasing her. "But you'd better get dressed, or I'll be too distracted."

Rebecca grimaced. "I probably look like a mess now." She put a hand up to her hair. "Like I just rolled out of bed."

"I've never seen you look better."

"Is this the groveling part?"

"No, it's the part where I'm hungry, and I want you to get dressed." Jeff softened his words with a smile. "Now, hurry up."

"Yes, sir."

Her lips twitched again, and by the time she reached the living room and her wrinkled clothes, she could no longer suppress the smile. She enjoyed the pleasant ache between her thighs, and the way her muscles felt watery and light. She also thrilled at the unfamiliar twinge in her heart and the unexpected contentment that suffused her entire body.

Chapter Seven

Jeff knocked on her door at precisely ten on Christmas night, and she smiled at his punctuality. When she opened the door for him, five festively wrapped boxes greeted her, with a huge poinsettia poised on the top.

"Merry Christmas!" he said from behind the gifts.

"Oh, my God, how did you get all of that up here?" She asked, snatching the plant before it could fall.

"Very carefully," he said, stepping into her apartment.
"Where can I put these?"

"Over on the couch is fine. This poinsettia is huge."

"I got the biggest one I could find," he informed her.

"Well, it'll look lovely by my tree..." She set it beside the tiny evergreen and frowned. "It also looks like it could beat my tree up."

He wrapped his arms around her from behind and buried his face in her neck. "Mmm, I've missed you."

"Your nose is like ice. Is it cold out there?"

"Yeah, it almost feels like winter. What about my hands?" He snuck them under her shirt and cupped her breasts. "Are they cold, too?"

"Ack!" She squirmed away from him and freed herself from his clutches. "Don't touch me with those ice blocks again!"

He smiled and made grabbing motions. "How am I supposed to get them warm if I can't touch you?"

"Sit on them." She touched his lips with the tip of her finger. "But maybe I can help you there." She stretched her

legs and brushed his mouth with hers. He moaned and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close and fitting her body against his, molding her curves into his.

"Mmm, you taste like eggnog," he muttered.

"Do you want some?"

"I want some more of you, but..." He lifted his head and stepped back. "I want you to open your presents first."

Rebecca eyed them, concerned. "Jeff, I know we agreed to exchange gifts but..."

"But you didn't get me a half dozen gifts?"

"More like one."

"That's fine." Jeff winked. "These are really more for me anyway."

"How was your Christmas?" Rebecca asked as she walked into the kitchen. She pulled the homemade eggnog from the fridge and poured two mugs worth, adding a healthy dose of rum to both.

"The usual. I mean, good, I guess, but I missed you." He stepped into the kitchen and accepted his drink. "How about yours?"

"A little bit rough at first, but things smoothed over after we exchanged gifts. By dinner, we were having a great time." Rebecca tried to focus on the memory of her father laughing over turkey, and not crying by the tiny Christmas tree.

"We'd better open those presents now," Jeff announced.

"Why?"

"Because I'm about ready to take you right here on the kitchen floor."

Rebecca smiled. "Well, we've never done that before..."

"Come on."

Jeff settled on the floor in front of the couch and Rebecca fished out the small gift from beneath the tree. Her stomach clenched and suddenly, she wanted to chuck it out the window. She wasn't the best Christmas shopper at the best of times. Faced with the task of finding just the right gift for a man she hadn't known for long—but with whom she was falling in love with nonetheless—she had been sick to her stomach from nerves. And, of course, Jeff had more money than she did. He'd probably exceeded her modest effort, not only quantity but also quality.

"Just ... if you hate it ... don't tell me," she said, thrusting the gift into his hand. "I mean, I included a gift receipt, so—you know—if you have to take it back, do it secretly."

Jeff smiled at her obvious nerves and patted the floor beside him. "Come here." He waited until she settled beside him before tearing the paper apart, revealing a simple VHS tape. He squinted his eyes and studied the title.

Rebecca looked at the copy of *Atame* and explained quickly, "I noticed that you had *All About My Mother* and *High Heels* and *Talk to Her,* and I didn't think that any Almodóvar collection would be complete without it..."

"You like Almodóvar's films?" He interrupted.

"Well, yeah."

He tilted his head and studied her as though he had never seen her before in his life. "Do you watch them in Spanish?"

"Yes. I wish it was released on DVD."

Jeff turned the box over in his hand. "You know, other than the person who introduced me to Almodóvar's films, I've never met anybody who had even heard of him."

"He's not that obscure."

Jeff kissed the top of her head. "Thank you, Rebecca. I think this is the best present anybody's given me in a long time."

"It's just a movie."

He smiled. "Your turn. Which one do you want to open first?"

"Um, the biggest one."

"Very well." Jeff reached behind him and grabbed the largest box. "Enjoy."

Rebecca tore it apart like a child to expose a long, white rectangular box. "Did you get me clothes?"

"Open it and see."

She lifted the top and tore out handfuls of tissue paper. "Did you get me tissue paper?"

"Keep looking."

At the bottom of the box, obscured and almost lost by all the filler, she found a single handmade certificate. *Good for* one full-body massage. Expiration: Never. Rebecca snorted. "Did you have to wrap it like this?"

"It's an old trick I learned from my mother."

Rebecca smiled and kissed his cheek. "I'm going to cash this in as soon as I can."

"I can't wait." He grabbed the next gift and handed it to her. "Here you go."

Rebecca was more careful with this package, wary of any more surprises. She exposed another plain, white box, but, when she opened it, it was clear there was more than just tissue paper.

"Oh," Rebecca breathed, "look at this." She pulled out several bottles of expensive, exquisite smelling shampoos, conditioners, soaps, creams and bath beads. Some were apple, some peach and others were marked with flowers. Pleased, she opened them one at a time and inhaled deeply. "These are lovely."

"I picked them out personally. And here's gift number three."

"You know, you didn't have to do all of this."

"I wanted to."

The third box also contained multi-flavored bottles, but with a different twist. "Edible lube?"

"Ever play with edible lube?"

"I didn't know edible lube existed. Is it actually edible?"

"Yeah. Some brands taste like crap, but this stuff is top of the line."

"Apple, peach, cherry, chocolate, vanilla and blueberry. Yum."

"Just two more to go. Here."

"I'm starting to feel spoiled..."

Jeff only grinned.

Rebecca opened the box and gaped. "I've never seen this much chocolate in one place."

"Not just any chocolate. This is special, German chocolate."

"Oh, my God, I can't eat all of this!" There looked to be at least a dozen full-sized bars, plus a variety of smaller, individually wrapped delicacies.

"Well, you're going to share, of course."

"Of course."

"And here's the one that I really didn't know about. I mean, I thought you'd like it but..."

Rebecca smiled when she saw her own fear and hesitation mirrored on his face. "You've got a pretty good record so far." She accepted the gift and lifted an eyebrow. "This is heavier than the other ones."

"Yeah."

Rebecca almost dropped it, shocked, when she finally tore the wrapping away. She stared at the large, hardcover copy of *The Wilco Book* with sheer delight. She promised herself at least once a week that she'd buy it as soon as she had the money, but she never had the money. "Oh, my God. Oh, my God, how did you know?" She clutched the book to her chest and beamed.

"Well, I didn't know for sure, but I figured it'd be worth a shot. Merry Christmas."

Rebecca carefully placed the book on the couch and then launched herself into Jeff's arms, covering his face and neck with big, wet kisses.

"Does this mean I did good?" he asked, around the onslaught.

"It means you've done great. Now, let me show you my appreciation."

Jeff wrapped his arms around her and lowered her to the floor. "Actually, I've been waiting all day to try this." He held up the chocolate lube and smiled.

"All day, huh?"

"Mmm."

He pulled her pants and underwear down her legs and tossed them away before squeezing a healthy dose of the lubricant out of the tube and onto his fingers. He nudged her thighs with his other hand, encouraging her to open her legs for him, and then slid the cool gel over her pussy, covering her clit, and wetting her lips. She jerked beneath his hand and moaned.

Jeff brought his fingers up to his mouth and licked away her now chocolate-flavored juices.

"Do you like that?" she asked.

"It's delicious."

"I want to try. Lie down."

Jeff unbuckled his pants, opened his fly, and stretched out on the floor beside her. She grabbed the bottle of vanilla and drizzled it over the tip of his cock, allowing the gel to drip down his shaft. She rubbed the head with the palm of her hand, spreading the lube around it evenly. He sucked in his breath sharply as she applied more pressure to the sensitive area, moving her wrist in a tight circle. His body tensed and his hips arched. She watched his face contort into something that resembled a happy grimace, and her own body reacted to his obvious pleasure

Rebecca lifted her hand and he immediately relaxed and opened his eyes. "Now," he said roughly, "how does it taste?"

Rebecca flashed a wicked smile and straddled his chest, her back to his face. He wrapped his hands around her waist and guided her backwards as she leaned forward. Jeff slid his tongue along her chocolate covered flesh just as the head of his cock nudged her lips. She swirled her tongue around his hot skin, lapping up his salty pre-come and the surprisingly sweet lube.

Rebecca relaxed her jaw and guided his erection deep into her mouth until it brushed the back of her throat. Jeff moaned and the vibrations made her clit pulse. He twirled his tongue around the hard flesh, and her moan echoed his. Rebecca could think clearly, not overtaken by the swirling delight of his tongue and his cock, until he slipped two fingers into her, pushing them deep into her passage, and moved quickly against her g-spot.

The contact sent her entire body into overdrive. Rebecca bucked against his face, silently begging him to go faster, to lick her harder. She wrapped her hand around the base of his shaft and pumped her wrist in time with her head, stroking him and sucking him. She used the tip of her tongue against his sensitive skin, rolling it around the tip of his cock every time she pulled her head back.

Rebecca loved the low, barely audible moans that came from deep in his chest. She couldn't quite hear them, but she could feel his chest vibrating beneath her body, and those vibrations echoed through her body. She loved the way his cock tasted underneath the sugary vanilla lube, all salty and hard.

Rebecca cupped his balls with her free hand, and almost as soon as she touched them, his hips jerked forward, his balls tightened, his cock twitched against her tongue, and a flood of hot come poured down her throat. She kept her lips wrapped around him and sucked on his cock until his hips stopped pushing forward and he relaxed against the floor.

Jeff's tongue and fingers had been moving at the same feverish pace of her mouth and fist, but he slowed as soon as she let his cock fall from her mouth. She pushed her hips back, forcing herself against his face, but he wrapped his arm around her and forced her to remain motionless. Once she stopped resisting, he started licking her with long, languid strokes of his tongue, dipping between her lips and exploring every bit of her soft skin.

Rebecca rested her head against his thigh and caught her breath. He slid his fingers into her and held them there, moving his fingertips against her most sensitive spot instead of building friction by pumping his hand. Instead of creating sparks and electricity that frazzled her brain and singed her nerves, he built a sweet, sultry tension that made her melt like sticky ice cream. Instead of forcing him to push her hard and fast into an explosion of fireworks, she relaxed and let him leisurely guide her down a garden path of pleasure.

Rebecca sucked her breath in and exhaled slowly. Each breath shortened, until minutes later, she was gasping and her head was swimming with delight. With each short breath, her body tensed, until she cried out and her pussy convulsed around his fingers and tongue, her warm liquid covering his face and her thighs.

Rebecca lifted herself away from him and fell back onto the couch, weak and pleasantly tired. "I think I like the flavored lube," she murmured.

He nodded from his position on the floor and stretched his lean body. "Do you have a VCR?"

"You want to watch your movie now?"

"If you don't mind."

"I don't." Rebecca pushed herself to her feet. She grabbed the movie and unwrapped the plastic seal. From the corner of her eye, she saw him stand up, finish undressing, and reach for the afghan she kept on the back of her couch.

As she cued up the tape, he went into the kitchen and poured more eggnog, and grabbed the sugar cookies that were left over from her father's visit, and the big box of chocolates. She watched him with a slight smile. "You have enough food there for an army."

"I just want to be prepared." Jeff sat on the couch and held the blanket up. "Come on."

She grabbed the remote and settled beside him, resting her head on his shoulder and draping her leg over his. He leaned over and kissed her temple, and Rebecca smiled as a wave of quiet peace flooded her body. She couldn't remember the last time she felt this comfortable or secure.

"I hope you don't have any plans for New Year's Eve," Jeff said.

"I don't."

"Or Valentine's Day."

"Not yet."

"Or the Fourth of July."

"I usually go to a fireworks show, but you can come, too."
"Or next Christmas."

"I'll keep the day open," Rebecca promised.

"I think I'm falling for you," he admitted, handing her a small piece of chocolate. "What do you think of that?"

"I think you're crazy ... but I might be falling for you, too."

The credits started to roll on the television. He sipped his eggnog and she hoped this would be their first of many quiet Christmas nights spent together.

The End

About the Author:

"Passenger Side" is Pepper Espinoza's second published work with Liquid Silver Books. She is proud and honored to be included in an anthology with Lisa Marie and Robin Danner, and hopes to work with both authors again in the future. In the meantime, she's enjoying a mild Californian winter, and hopes to spend her own Christmas holiday eating Indian food on the patio.

Christmas Strangers

Lisa Marie

Dedication

To Steve, my own favorite Christmas Stranger.

Part One

Baltimore, Maryland Christmas Eve

It's a slow night. She knew before coming in to work that it would be. Rachael Morton has already wiped off the counters and all the tables as well as swept and mopped the floor. She's even filled all of the sugar containers and filled all the napkin dispensers. She's not sure why she hasn't just told Greg that they are closing early. The *Silver Spoon* was a diner without diners this Christmas Eve. Most people were home with their families, preparing for Santa Claus to come or getting some well-needed rest before traveling the next day. Some people were traveling now. Still others were at Christmas parties, drinking and laughing with other people that they usually hated in the light of day.

But not her. Not that she likes Greg or anything. And they aren't even talking to each other at the moment, much less laughing. But she guesses spending Christmas Eve here with him is better than spending it alone. She supposes he probably feels the same way. Even though she can hear the TV in the office blaring some repeat of *Star Trek*, or one of those other shows he insisted on gushing about to anybody that will listen.

You're being uncharitable, her conscience tells her. A voice which sounds a lot like her mother.

Well, mother, I feel uncharitable.

It's Christmas and usually she loved the lights, the colors, the cheer that just seemed to come with the season. But, not this year. This year has been pretty bad even by bad standards. So, there wasn't much to be cheery about.

She does feel edgy being in the restaurant alone, this late at night. With Greg. But, as long as he stays in the office watching TV, she should be alright. She glances at the clock. 10:37. *Do you know where your children are?* She has no children, will never have any children thanks to lazy ovaries. Just goes to show how bored she is to be thinking such stupid stuff. She should just close. Not like she'll get paid more for keeping it open. The owner might have made her manager, but the bulk of her income still came from tips. And tips don't come from empty tables. At least not in her experience.

The bell above the door dings, jerking her out of her thoughts. To see the door she has to lean forward a bit to see past the three foot Christmas tree situated at the end of the counter. She gasps when she sees the man standing there. He's about average height, his lean frame draped in a rumpled designer suit—she would have bet a month's wages that it was Armani—with a dark raincoat over top of that. A gold watch glints at his wrist as he flicks the cap of a silver lighter in his hand. Open, close, open, close. Over and over, as he looks around the diner, not seeming to really see it. He shuffles his Italian leather-adorned feet unconsciously. He was dressed much better than most people who came in here. The diner usually got the junkies who had managed to beg a few dollars out of a kind citizen, or the drunks who stumbled in after a night at the bar a block up and over. Lunch hour

brought in most of the businessmen, but this man was nothing like any them.

Maybe it was the short, black, spiky hair that contrasted with the expensive clothes. Or his almost model looks. Sharp cheekbones, full mouth, strong jaw and nose. Jet black brows slanted over eyes that were as blue as the Christmas lights winking in the windows. A scar trisected the right brow, giving him a roguish air.

How pretty, she thinks, her face immediately burning hot almost as soon as the thought goes through her head. She drops back from her toes and stares at the counter for a second, until she's sure she can speak and not make a fool of herself by stuttering. She hates to stutter. She always does it when she's nervous. And for some inexplicable reason, this man is making her nervous.

"It's seat yourself. I'll be with you in a minute." She peeks back around the tree in time to see him start at her words. Its almost like he's just remembered where he is. He fixes those eyes on her, and a little squeak gets caught in her throat at how haunted they look. There's something about them that pulls at her. He's in pain, she thinks, before she can stop herself. She flushes again, reminding herself that she's not particularly intuitive and to mind her own business.

"Sure, thanks. Take your time." He flips the lighter one last time, closing it with a sharp snap. Then, he walks across the floor and chooses a booth right across from where she's standing. Probably to make sure she doesn't forget about him. *That's not likely*, she thinks, watching him settle on the red vinyl of the bench. He goes back to toying with the lighter

once he's seated and she watches his fingers—strong, masculine fingers—slide over the smooth casing of the Zippo. An involuntary shiver rolls over her and she shakes it off, unnerved. Then, she goes back to looking at the receipts from their rare and brief busy dinner hour.

After a few minutes, and more than a few stolen looks, she gives up. She shoves them into the cash register and shuts the drawer. With pad and pencil in hand, she walks around the counter and over to his table, plastering a smile on her face. The closer she gets to him, the more her heart speeds, and she has to remember to breathe evenly. She's worked here seven years, and, in that time, she's had exactly two panic attacks. She sincerely hopes that this isn't the start of a third.

"What can I get you?" She says when she stops, her voice sounding unusually high to her own ears. Again, he seems not to notice her, even after she speaks. She sees a large, orange envelope on the table and vaguely wonders where it came from. She doesn't remember seeing it when he came in. *It's not your business*, she reminds herself, even as her eyes scan over the surface. *Tyler Jennings*, she reads silently. She steals another glance at him to make sure she's not being caught spying. *Carlyle and Fitz, Attorneys at Law*, reads the return address. Deciding she's spied enough, she clears her throat. "Uhm, sir?"

"What? Oh, sorry. What's good here?" he asks, after finally hearing her.

"Do you want an honest answer?" she says, before she can stop herself. She flushes *again* and drops her eyes. "I-I mean,

everything," she finishes softly, feeling like an idiot. She hears his chuckle, and wishes the floor would open up and swallow her whole.

"S'alright. Wasn't exactly expecting a gourmet meal when I walked in," *He sounds like a movie star*, her mind registers almost dreamily. She stares at his mouth for a few seconds, fascinated by the sound of the rich, deep voice falling from it, hoping he'll speak again. Then, she realizes what she's doing and starts wishing for the floor swallowing again.

"Th-the m-meatloaf is good," she finally manages, feeling the hot prick of tears start behind her eyes. She hates feeling like this, acting like this. Somehow, she can't seem to stop. She doesn't dare look up at him and meet his eyes, she just knows she'll die from embarrassment at the mocking she's sure to see there. He chuckles again and she *knows* she's going to die.

"Tha's fine. And coffee. Black."

"S-sure. Be right back with your coffee," she flees then, without looking up at him, her heart hammering like thunder in her ears.

* * * *

Ty watches her go with mild interest. He feels the smile that was tugging his lips fade almost as soon as she disappears behind the counter. Somewhere in the back of his turbulent mind, he registers that she doesn't look like the waitresses you see on TV, with their hair teased ten miles high and make-up spackled on, as they take your order while snapping gum. This girl is young, he'd say no more than 25.

For some reason, it makes his 32 years seem old. He could detect no make-up on her peaches and cream skin other than a light dab of gloss across her lush mouth. She's full and womanly under her ugly, light blue waitress uniform. Her dark blonde hair is pulled away from her round face, letting him see the smoky blue of her eyes with ease. He realizes, quite unconsciously, that she's pretty. And shy, if the way she was avoiding his gaze means anything.

Nothing like Julianne, he thinks, glaring down at the envelope on the table. Anger—red hot and searing—scorches through him as he eyeballs his name. His wife—ex-wife, he reminds himself fiercely—was all sable hair and porcelain skin. Her beauty was delicate, like a china doll's. Her eyes a clear, crystal green. She gave off an air of being childlike, helpless. But, behind those beguiling eyes was a very cunning mind. A fact made abundantly clear today. Oh, sure, he knew that their marriage was over. Had been for over a year now. But this, this made it final. And on Christmas Eve, no less.

Julianne always had a taste for the ironic, he thought, unconsciously reaching for a cigarette. Of course, he at least had some satisfaction in knowing that she wasn't getting anything more from him than he had given her during their marriage. The fault in their break-up was hers. He damn sure wasn't going to pay for it.

"I'm sorry, sir, but there's no smoking in here." The waitress's apologetic voice cut through his bitter thoughts in time to keep him from touching the flame of his lighter to the tip of his cigarette.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry about that. Distracted," he says with a shrug. She offers him a smile and actually meets his eyes this time. He finds himself caught for a second by the way the artificial light sparkles in them. Then, she drops her gaze from his and the second is lost. He glances down and watches as she pours his coffee, the rich, fragrant brew wafting up to tickle his nose. "Fresh?" he asks, half grateful, half surprised.

"Y-yeah. I have a thing about old coffee," she answers, her voice low. Another shy smile is flashed and he is charmed by the way her skin pinks up under his scrutiny. "I'm always throwing out old and brewing fresh."

"Well, cheers to you, then. I detest old coffee m'self." He lifts his cup in a mock toast before taking a sip of the hot brew. His sigh of satisfaction has a flower of pleasure blooming in her chest.

"You're not from around here," she states nervously, berating herself the second it falls from her lips. *Well, duh, Rachael.* She winces at her stupidity and turns to leave. But, a warm, firm grasp on her wrist stops her. She jerks a bit at the unfamiliar touch and her eyes go a little wide. He immediately lets go, bringing the hand up, palm out, to show her he meant no harm.

"Sorry," he mumbles, flashing her a grin. She could swear her heart skips a beat.

"N-no. I'm sorry. I-I'm a little jumpy." She feels foolish, and she's pretty sure she looks foolish too.

"I shouldn't have grabbed you like that." he counters. He watches her smile again, her nervousness around him palpable. He surprises himself with what he says next. "Would

you ... would you join me?" She blinks, obviously caught off guard. She looks so sweet right then, with her eyes that seem to go on forever and her lips parted a little in surprise.

"I-I-I c-can't. I'm working."

"Oh, sure, and I can see you are very busy right now," he says dryly, with a quirk of his scarred brow. There's amusement in his eyes and she wonders if he's making fun of her. But she can detect no malice in his sparkling eyes.

"No, I guess we aren't," she concedes with a little laugh. She can hear Greg moving around in the kitchen, it's so quiet.

"Food's up!" Greg calls, sliding the plate up to the warming area. She's sure he's headed back to the office to finish watching his show.

"I'll get your food." The man nods, his eyes dropping back to the envelope as she moves away. Once behind the counter, she puts the coffee carafe back on the burner and reaches for his plate. Then, without asking herself why, she pauses to pour herself a cup of coffee and returns to the table. "Do you still want me to..." she places the plate in front of him, and stands, holding her coffee, until he waves her into the seat across from him.

"Yes, please." She likes listening to him talk. His voice is rich and smooth and seems almost sensual without actually meaning to be. She settles across from him and reaches for the sugar dispenser just as he's reaching for the salt. Their fingers brush, and Rachael jerks from the electric current that sings up her arm from the contact. She steals a glance at him to see if he felt it, too, but he's not looking at her. He's seasoning his food and looking like nothing out of the

ordinary has happened. Calling herself stupid, and reminding herself that she left behind foolish, romantic notions a long time ago, she reaches for the sugar once more. "So, what's a young girl like you doing toiling your time away in a diner on Christmas Eve? Shouldn't you be out with your boyfriend or something? Going to parties?"

"I don't have a boyfriend," she says quietly, stirring the sweetener in her coffee. He's surprised at this. A pretty thing like her should have two or three boyfriends begging for her attention.

"Are the men in this town blind?" he hears himself say, as he stabs a piece of meatloaf and brings it to his lips. She gives a nervous laugh at that and shakes her head.

"No. Just not interested."

"Oh, so they're stupid then?" She blushes, and he can't help but think it's the cutest thing he's ever seen. *Very different from Julianne*, he thinks again.

"I-I started working here to pay off student loans."

"What are you studying?"

"Nothing. I don't go anymore." It's a touchy subject, he can tell by the way she's toying with her spoon in her coffee. It's none of his business. All he had wanted was a little company to get his mind off of what was in the envelope. He didn't want to play shrink to a twenty-something college drop out. But, then again, the sadness that clouds her face has him asking,

"Why?" Her eyes dart to his, surprise that he would care evident in their gray-blue depths. They are quite lovely eyes, he realizes, looking into them. Multi-faceted and deep like the

ocean. And, in them, he can see an inborn kindness and basic innocence that seems to be long gone from most of the people on the planet. He wants to get lost in them, to have some of that rub off on him, so he can remember what it feels like to be human again. To be cleansed.

But, of course, that's silly. So, he shrugs it off and just looks at her with cool interest and continues to eat. He doesn't really taste the food. Just mechanically cuts and eats, chewing instinctively. If he thinks about it, he'd realize that he hasn't really enjoyed anything, not even a simple meal, in almost a year. But he doesn't think about it.

"Family," she answers simply, still stirring that spoon around in her cup, the metal tapping the sides with little clinks. She's used to answering this question. Her customers often ask why she's here, in this place, when she should be out somewhere, having a life. She's settled on this answer a long time ago. It's close enough to the truth that it's not a lie, but vague enough not to tell them anything too personal. She glances up at him to see that eyebrow raised high again, and instinctively knows he's not the type to let that cryptic statement suffice.

"Family? I can understand that, I suppose. There's no way in hell I'd be an antiques dealer otherwise." She's a little surprised that he didn't pursue her past further, but she's relieved.

"Antiques? You sell old furniture?" She blushes at his chuckle, thinking she'd made herself sound stupid again. She asks herself once more *why* did she sit down with him?

"Yeah, basically. Though my father's boxers would probably twist if he heard me talkin' about it like that."

"Oh," is all she says. She finally stops stirring her coffee and lifts it to take a sip. "Do you *like* selling antiques?" He stops eating and a quizzical look passes over his sharp features. She wonders if she's said something wrong. Then, he starts to laugh—a real, full laugh. She's stares at him, wide eyed, wondering if Greg had put some of his 'special herbs' in the food again.

"You know," he says, after he's calmed down. "I think you're the first person who has *ever* asked me that."

"Really?" She can't imagine that. Her mother, rest her soul, always asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up. There was never any pressure to be one thing or the other. She could have the world if she so desired, at least as far as mama was concerned.

"Yes, really. It was always 'expected' for me to go into the family business." He sneers when he says this, the expression lifting his lip in ways that Elvis could only have dreamed of. "But then, family has a way of making you do things you don't really want to," he finishes, dropping his utensils on his now empty plate.

"Yeah, I guess they do." She takes a sip of her coffee as he reaches for his. He looks up at her, caught by the wistful sound of her voice. He's surprised to see the longing in her eyes as she stares unseeing at the envelope on the table. He somehow doubts it's the chipped Formica that it was lying on that she wants so badly.

"You all right?" he asks, jarring her from her thoughts. Another blush creeps over her skin, the pink somehow making the smokiness of her eyes more vivid. *She's really quite lovely*, he thinks, then he feels something inside of him stir. Something he thought long dead.

"Y-y-yes, I-I'm fine." She sets her cup back down too quickly. As soon as her fingers release it, it tips over onto its side, spilling the dark brew across the table in a small river. It slides silkily across the table, heading straight for the envelope. "Oh, no!" she cries, as they both scramble into action. Ty snatches the envelope out of harm's way and throws it onto the bench next to him, then grabs a handful of napkins to help her staunch the flow. "I-I-I'm s-sorry," she stammers, soaking up as much as she can with her own handful of napkins.

"It's all right. Was an accident," he soothes.

"I'm so stupid! Just a clumsy cow." Ty's eyes shoot up to her as this flows out of her mouth. His eyes are wide with surprise that she would say something like that. But, once his gaze settles on her, he realizes that it's not really *her* talking. The way her mouth was working with no sound coming out other than tiny whimpers and the glazed, panicked look in her eyes told him that she was repeating something someone had said to her. A lot.

An irrational rage on her behalf sprang up in him, making his eyes flash and his jaw clench so tight it almost popped under the stress. He wants to kill whoever said that to her, made her feel as if a tiny, inconsequential accident was enough to hate herself for. By the time he felt calm enough to

speak again, to tell her ... what, he didn't know ... she was already fleeing from the table, the cup, his plate and the sodden napkins clutched close to her chest.

"I-I-I'll g-g-get y-your check," she tells him, not looking back at him.

"Hey!" he says, as she disappears around the counter, her entrance into the kitchen blocked from view by the sad-looking Christmas tree situated on the end. He stares at the top edge of the kitchen doors as they swing in and back out, indicating that she was gone. He has no choice but to stand, staring at the tree as it blinks merrily with reds, greens and blues. *Shit*.

* * * *

Stupid, stupid, stupid, her mind chants, the voice that is echoing in her head sounding suspiciously like her father. Cold, emotionless, full of contempt. The dishes in her hand slide into the sink as she leans against it, the sound of her heart throbbing in her ears so loud that she doesn't know whether or not they broke when they landed.

Deep breaths, count to ten. He can't hurt you anymore, she reminds herself, the image of Frank Morton rising up in her head like a phoenix from the flame. An average, unassuming-looking man, he had been proud as a peacock when her brother Carl had been born. But then she had arrived, a girl, utterly useless in Frank's eyes, except to pick up the slack when mama had gotten sick. And to use as a whipping girl whenever his mood had turned sour. She squeezes her eyes shut against the thoughts, closing them so

tight that the lights behind her lids swirl in crazy patterns, making her dizzy. But it swipes the picture of her father away, clearing it from her mind so she can breathe again.

"Rachael?" Greg came out of the office, his eyes narrowed as he looks at her shaking shoulders. He wonders if she's having some sort of fit and feels mildly annoyed that he has to deal with this. They don't pay him enough for it.

She jerks when she hears his voice, embarrassment that *Greg* is seeing her like this flaring bright in her chest. If there was ever a person *not* to show weakness to, it was him. And that was just because he would use it against you later to get something he wanted. *Jerk*, she thinks as she breathes deep to calm her racing heart.

"I'm fine," she tells him, managing to keep the tremor out of her voice by sheer will. *Deep breaths, deep breaths.*

"Yeah, sure." Greg rolls his eyes, and starts to go back into the office. He pauses just inside the room and looks back over to her. "Can we close soon? Don't know about you, but I have a life." Rachael lets out a bitter laugh and casts a glance in his direction. She feels a bit calmer now, steadier.

Yeah, sure you do, Greg. And I'm Miss USA, she thinks nastily.

"Start to clean up. I'll cash him out, then we can leave." She's always amazed at how confident she sounds when talking to Greg. She wishes it could spill over into other aspects of her life. Greg goes back into the office, muttering something under his breath. She's sure it's nothing pleasant, but doesn't really care. As long as he does what he's told, that's all that matters to her. She glances down into the sink

and is mildly surprised that nothing has broken. *Thank God for small favors*, she thinks before turning away from it.

Her heart tries to speed up again as she walks over to the doors leading back to the dining room. She has humiliated herself in front of a customer, and she wishes that she could just blink her eyes and take it all away. But that sort of stuff only happens on TV, so there was no rescue from embarrassment for her. With a deep, bolstering breath, she straightens her apron and walks through the doors...

...to find an empty dining room.

"Oh, no," she gasps, as she rounds the counter to see that her dark-haired antiques dealer is gone. Maybe he just went to the bathroom, logic tells her. Unfortunately, logic didn't account for people who skipped out on their check. That sick feeling settles even further in her stomach when she reaches the table to find the raincoat gone, as well as the envelope. There's no doubt in her mind he's gone, and a deep sense of disappointment washes over her. Telling herself it's because she now has to pay for his meal, she shrugs it off and starts wiping down the table. Colorful curses, the kind that she would never say out loud, strung through her mind like Christmas lights. They came to a dead halt when she moved the metal rack holding the salt, pepper and menus. There, tucked between that and the napkin dispenser, was a carefully folded napkin, with just the hint of green sticking out of the top.

Feeling extremely foolish for thinking him a crook, she reaches out and plucks it up, smiling at the sloping 'Merry Christmas' written across the front. Her heart skips in her

chest as her eyes landed on the two crisp fifty-dollar bills staring up at her.

Her eyes immediately jump to the door, as if she expected him to be standing there, watching. Of course, he wasn't, having decided to leave his gift and not remain present for her to try to give it back. Her eyes drop to the money again, her brows knitted together in confusion. His bill would have come to barely six dollars. This was a ninety-four dollar tip. *Why*?

With little choice other than to either give it to Greg, or keep it for herself, she tucks one fifty into the pocket of her apron and takes the other around the counter to the register to ring out his ticket. Then, with \$93.21 weighing down her apron, she walks over to the door and locks it, her eyes searching down the empty street for her benefactor. She has no idea why he felt he needed to give her that money. But, she sends a silent *thank you* out to him before turning away to go turn off the *Open* sign.

* * * *

"Want me to walk you home?" Greg asks twenty minutes later, as she locks the door for the night. She pockets her keys and turns to look at him. She knows that he's not really interested in walking her home. The way he's dancing on the balls of his feet, his eyes darting down the opposite direction of the street tells her this. And really, Greg is the *last* person she wants to be with right now, so she shakes her head no and waves him on.

"No, thanks. Merry..." she starts as Greg practically bolts away. "...Christmas," she finishes, the word barely a whisper. She watches him trot down the sidewalk for a second, then draws her jacket a little tighter around her before starting off in the other direction.

As she walks, she takes in the shiny tinsel bells and stockings that hang merrily from the lampposts, their golds, reds and greens glinting in the soft light. Silver snowflakes hang from store awnings, spinning in the breeze. It's the closest they'll get to a white Christmas this year. Not that she really minds, though. Snow reminds her of home, of listening to her father fit and rage over the piles of white stuff that accumulated each year. And each year, she would be the one outside shoveling it. Carl couldn't be bothered with such a menial task. He was too busy basking in his place as male heir. Of course, what exactly he was supposed to inherit, Rachael was never sure. A broken-down farm that saw more hard times than good? Wasn't much to be happy about as far as she was concerned.

If it weren't for her mother, she would have probably still been back there in that town, waiting on her father and the heir apparent. But, mama had put her foot down this one time and Rachael had been able to go to college. Her grades had earned her a partial scholarship to anywhere she wanted to go. So, off to Maryland she had gone. It was as far away from her father as she could get. And here she stayed, even though her college days were long over.

Pushing all thoughts of unhappier times away, Rachael stops in front of the giant tree lighting up the front of an

outdoor mall. Her apartment is just a block over, which gives her the excuse to stop here on her way home. It's huge, seeming to stretch forever up to the sky. It's lit even now, the lights and colors draping its rich, green branches like a beacon in the night.

Merry Christmas, Mama, she says to herself, sending a little smile up to the heavens. Her heart aches a little as she thinks of the woman she lost just this year. It still hurts, to think that her mama isn't there to talk to anymore. Like tonight. Rachael could have gone home, picked up the phone and called her mother, to tell her all about the handsome stranger who had left her the huge tip. They could have giggled and laughed like schoolgirls, as they tried to decipher just why he would have done it.

But, unfortunately, that wasn't to be anymore. Rachael is left to ponder this by herself. And it saddens her even more on this night that's supposed to be joyous.

With a sigh and one last glance at the massive tree, she starts walking again. In an effort to lift her mood, she thinks about the man. She had made a massive fool out of herself, she knew. But still, he had left her that gift. And, really, it was a gift. No one tipped like that. Ever. The most she had ever gotten was ten dollars. And she's still convinced that was because the woman had been in such a hurry she didn't notice she had grabbed a ten instead of a one.

She wonders about him. Wonders what might have happened had she not made such a supreme ass of herself and if he hadn't had that sad, haunted look in his eyes. It would have been nice if she'd been able to relax with him. To

laugh and flirt and act like the girls she used to envy back in school. The ones who made talking to a man look as easy as getting dressed. Or undressed, as the case may be.

Who knows, she thinks as she walks up to the door of her ground floor apartment. If she had been able to be that type of girl, maybe she would have gotten more in her Christmas stocking than wishes and dreams and a whole pile of 'what ifs.'

"Oh, well. Looks like we're celebrating Christmas alone this year, Chessy," she says as she walks inside, swinging the door shut behind her. The cat in question looks up from her perch on the couch, blinks once, then lays her head back down. "Hello to you, too," Rachael says with a laugh. She shrugs out of her jacket and hangs it on the hook by the door. She kicks off her shoes as well, and leaves them next to the door before starting towards her bedroom. It's dark, but she doesn't feel much of a need for light. Her apartment's not that big, for one. For two, she's been living here for three years, since she moved out of the dorms. If she didn't know her way around the small space by now, she never would.

She strips out of her uniform when she gets into her bedroom, finally turning on the small lamp on her nightstand. The room is small, barely big enough for the double bed, dresser and nightstand she has in there. But she still has room enough to move. The bed is simple, with a bookshelf headboard that she rescued from a yard sale about the same time she moved in. A patchwork quilt that had belonged to her mother was draped across it, the soft blues, yellows and pinks soothing. The dresser and nightstand were simple,

stock pieces that could be found anywhere. She prettied them up with some seashell stencils and colorful scarves across the top.

After emptying the pockets, she drops her uniform in the laundry basket sitting by the bedroom door and sifts through the dresser for her comfy clothes. She carries a pair of pink and blue flannel pj bottoms, a pair of plain white panties and a big, oversize T-shirt into the bathroom. She quickly showers off the day, taking her time washing her hair. The smell of strawberries and honey surrounds her, relaxing her.

She remembers the man again—the heat of his amazingly blue eyes, the sensuality of his smile. She imagines that he would smell like tobacco and maybe something spicy. Her mind takes it to another level, and suggests what he might taste like. Wild and fierce and overwhelming. She's not sure why she thinks this, but looking back, he seemed to have passion just singing along under his skin, almost desperate to break out.

With a deep, satisfied sigh, she tilts her head back and lets the shampoo run from her hair. The warm water coasts over her, tantalizing her nerves and invoking thoughts of gentle fingers caressing her skin. A soft moan escapes her lips as she imagines whose fingers they are. A soft throb has started at the apex of her thighs, sending out little tremors over her body. Without thought, her hands slide over her skin, taking away the stress of the evening and fueling the fantasy playing out in her mind.

She imagines running her hands through jet black curls and over sharp cheeks and jaw. As her fingers close around a

stiff nipple, she pretends that they are full, soft lips and gentle teeth teasing the bud. Her other hand has slid down her stomach, following the path of the water to her center. It doesn't take long for her fingers to find and tease the sensitive bundle of nerves there.

It doesn't really take long for her orgasm to slide over her. "Tyler," she gasps, as her knees tremble and her body throbs. She leans back against the white tile of the shower stall and relaxes into the climax, sighing as it takes away all her tension. A little giggle escapes her lips as her nerves stop twitching and relaxation starts to seep into her bones.

"Thanks for the tip *and* the great orgasm," she says, laughing again. She quickly rinses off, then steps out, drying and dressing just as quickly. Her hair is wrapped in a thick, peach-colored towel as she walks back into the living room, plans to make popcorn and to watch *It's a Wonderful Life* prominent in her mind. She almost trips over her own feet, however, when a knock sounds on the door. She eyes said door suspiciously for a few seconds, a thread of fear working its way through her short-lived ease.

"Who on Earth is that?" she asks the cat, who seems like it could care less who's outside their door at midnight on Christmas Eve. "Somehow I doubt it's Santa Claus," Another knock, and she finally starts forward, her steps slow. She makes sure the chain is on before opening it, and when she does, she's sure her eyes are as wide as saucers with shock. "You!"

"Hello, gorgeous."

Part Two

"Sorry for, uh, interruptin' your shower," he says, with a wave of his hand. She just stares at him a second longer, her brain frozen against comprehension. She's shocked that he's here, on her doorstep, looking at her as if he belongs there.

"Wh-what?" she manages, after she's realized he's looking at her expectantly.

"Your shower? Didn't mean to interrupt." Her face suddenly heats when what she was doing in the shower—and who she was thinking about—jumps happily into her mind. Hastily, she reaches up and drags the towel from her hair, hiding her face behind a long, wet curtain of blonde.

"H-h-how d-did you find me?" She glances up through the damp tendrils at him. Now it's his turn to look extremely embarrassed, and he scrubs a hand over his dark hair before smiling sheepishly at her. She was struck by how cute he looked, how boyish and sweet.

"I, er, followed you."

"You what?" Okay, so maybe he's not cute after all. Maybe he's scary and stalkery and ... oh, God. Should she scream?

He watches her as all this plays across her face. She's very easy to read, he notices, her eyes wide and just a little scared behind her dark honey hair. He wants to reach out and push it away from her face, so he can really look at her and, hopefully, instill some confidence that he's not there to kill or her. Or worse.

"I saw you, over at the big tree in the square. You looked ... very sad," he explains, lifting a finger to scratch a point behind his ear and a boyish grin tugs his lips. He reminds her very much of a little boy getting caught doing something he shouldn't, right then. "I..." he trails off, his face suddenly unsure and he feels more than a little silly. "I just wanted to spend some time with you," he admits. Her eyes widen impossibly more at that.

"Why?" slips out of her mouth before she can catch it, her tone disbelieving and just a little awed. Why would someone like him want to spend time with her? He can see the question written clearly in her eyes. He wonders again why this girl underestimates herself so much.

"Because," he starts, struggling to explain something he's not even sure he *can* explain. After he left the diner, he'd wandered around the quiet streets of the town, the envelope weighing heavily in his pocket. He didn't want to go back to his depressingly solitary hotel room, his only company a bottle of Jack Daniels and his divorce papers. So, when he found himself on the edge of the square, his eyes locked on the waitress as she stared up at the tree, her entire stance mirroring his own feelings ... it had seemed natural to follow her. Of course, once they were outside her apartment, common sense returned and he realized that his behavior was bordering on criminal. But he couldn't make himself turn away from her closed door. It had taken him twenty minutes—and at least three cigarettes—before he finally decided to go knock.

He had left the diner to save her the embarrassment of having to face him after her ... whatever it was. And now, here he is, on her doorstep, looking into suspicious eyes the color of a warm sea, her hair hanging in a damp curtain around her face. All he can think about is kissing her. What the fucking hell is wrong with him?

"Because I don't want to be alone," he states simply, a heavy sigh punctuating the loneliness he feels. "And I don't think you do either." They stare at each other for a few long seconds after that, her eyes wide and obviously distrustful. Finally, after she has made no move to deny or accept what he's said, he scrubs a hand through his hair, calls himself a fool and offers her a brittle smile. "Look, 'm sorry. You don't want to be bothered by some stranger on Christmas Eve. Thanks for hearing me out. Good night." He turns to leave; his shoulders slumped in the dark material of his raincoat, his hands shoved in the pockets.

"Wait," Rachael calls, before she can even think to stop herself. He turns back to look at her, the blue of his eyes catching the light from the street lamps. It makes them glow like fire and she is suddenly flushed and too warm. What she is about to do is potentially dangerous, but she pushes that thought away. He's right, she realizes. She doesn't want to be alone. She's tired of it. For once, she wants to take something for herself. So ... "Come in."

He just looks at her for a long, hard minute, as if measuring her. She closes the door far enough to release the chain, then swings it open wide, opening her home—and herself—to him. He tilts his head and a dark, scarred brow

shoots up. Then he's walking towards her—stalking, really—his stride slow and predatory. He pauses in front of her, their bodies so close they can feel each other's heat. His eyes are so bright, so intense, that it's a struggle for her to meet them.

"Ty Jennings, at your service." His words are so formal, but his voice is smooth, like liquid silk. It slides over her in a warm wave of softness.

"R-Rachael Morton," she replies, her own voice whispery shy. She gives him a little smile, and looks up at him through her lashes. On any other woman, he would have thought the look calculated. Perfectly executed to make his body harden and his protective urge kick in. But not on her.

"Well, now that we're all nice and introduced..." His gaze drops to her lips, which part on a gasp at his boldness. He can just see the tip of her tongue and the hint of straight, white teeth. "...I s'pose I won't get slapped for this."

She *knows* he's going to kiss her. She's not sure if she wants him to or not, but she seems to have lost her ability to move. He brings his hands up and rests them on her shoulders, then slides them up the gentle curve of her throat until they are tangling with her hair and his palms are cradling her jaw. His warm, dry fingers coasting over that little bit of skin makes her shiver. His eyes are dark, swirling pools of want and pain, pulling her into the fierce current and leaving her gasping for breath. His fingers are gently massaging her scalp; his thumbs are playing along her jaw line in a feather-light touch. No one has ever looked at her the way he is right now. No one has ever elicited this much

feeling from her with just a whisper of a touch. Her body is aching from its desire to touch his. Her heart is hammering with anticipation and she feels like she's on fire.

The seconds tick by as they just stand there, staring. He's so close she can smell him. She's delighted to find that she was right. He *does* smell like tobacco and something else that's almost primal. Wild. *Male.* She can see the flecks of gold in his eyes, can hear the ragged breaths he's taking. She thinks she might scream if he doesn't kiss her soon.

Then, almost as if he can read her mind, he *is* kissing her. His mouth is surprisingly soft against hers, barely applying any pressure. But she can feel the raw power he's holding back, the passion that she can taste in his kiss. She whimpers, the sound drifting between them to be swallowed by the night. He pulls back, his eyes searching for hers again. She's breathing like she's just run a marathon and so is he. It frightens her a little to know that this man—this *stranger*—can affect her so badly.

Then his lips are on hers again, and there's no time to worry about it. He seems to have committed himself to this, because now his kiss is hard, demanding. *Hungry*. She parts her lips without thought and he takes the opportunity to slide his tongue inside.

She sags against him with the invasion, swept up in the sea of desire that has burst free between them. Her tongue seeks out his to tangle ravenously with it. Somehow, her fingers have found their way into his hair and they are restlessly sliding through it, the silky locks making her skin tingle. She vaguely feels his arms band around her waist to

crush her against him. When her feet leave the ground, she clings to him, switching the angle of the kiss to capture his bottom lip between her teeth. The slamming of the front door is a distant echo, drowning out the hiss of breath he sucks in when she sucks lightly on his lip.

She can feel his rock-hard length pressing intimately into her, and she rubs herself against it in a vain attempt to ease the ache building in her loins. A delicious sound spills from him in response. It's a cross between a growl and a groan and it inflames her senses even further. The second she's back on her feet again, her hands are pushing at his coat, sliding it off his shoulders to pool on the floor, forgotten. The suit jacket follows quickly, then her trembling fingers set to work on the buttons of his shirt. His own hands are not idle as she undresses him. They are under her shirt, pushing it up, taking the time to cup her heavy breasts and slide his thumbs over the peaks. She whimpers into his mouth and her fingers stumble over the buttons she's working on.

They only break their kiss long enough for the shirts to come off, but no sooner are the scraps of cloth liberated than they are back in each others' arms. They moan together when their bare torsos meet, the softness of her breasts yielding to the hard, lean planes of his chest. Their mouths fuse together as hands roam over warm, sleek skin. Possessing.

Ty is sure he's died and gone to heaven. Or at least that he's been granted a reprieve from hell. She tastes so sweet, her scent of strawberries and honey accentuating it and driving him crazy. Her skin is so smooth under his hands, so warm and supple. She's responding to him as if they've been

lovers for months, as opposed to strangers who have just met. He's never felt anything as good as her, tasted anything as delicious. And still he wants more. He needs to be inside of her, thrusting into her clenching heat and watching her eyes as she flows liquidly over the edge.

She easily goes to the floor as he lowers their bodies, her thighs spreading to accept him between. She pulls away from the kiss when she feels his erection rubbing into her cleft through her flannel pants, the action sending little darts of white hot pleasure burning through her. His lips move to her throat, nipping and licking down the soft flesh to suck hard on her pulse point. Her hips thrust against him, grinding her heat against his hardness.

"Jesus, sweetheart. *Fuck.*" His words fill the air, raw and husky. She almost laughs in triumph, a surge of power heightening her arousal and making her dizzy. But then her hands which had been memorizing the muscle of his back and shoulders are suddenly empty, and the exquisite hardness against her is gone. She turns her head to look for him, afraid she's done something wrong. But just as her eyes meet his, she feels his fingers sliding into the waist of her pants. His eyes are branding her as he pulls them and her panties down her legs; his kiss on her calves and thighs as he frees first one, then the second limb, has her gasping.

Her legs fall open again as soon as the soft cotton is free, exposing herself completely and fully to his hungry gaze. Amazingly, she doesn't feel self-conscious under the scrutiny. If anything, the longer he looks, the more desperate she is to feel him sliding against her, into her, filling her.

"You are exquisite," he tells her, his face full of raw desire. For her. She thinks she might climax from his words alone. He reaches for his fly, yanking the belt open and quickly working the button and zipper down. He rises up to his knees to slide the pants over his hips. She's only mildly surprised to see that the only thing between him and the designer material was air. She takes in the beauty of his body with an awed wonder that would have embarrassed him under different circumstances. But here, now, he holds himself proudly before her, the appreciation in her eyes a balm for his ragged soul.

He is an artist's creation come to life, she decides. All lean muscle and hard lines. The sun-kissed skin, the dark thatch of hair at the base of his shaft and finally, the shaft itself. Not too long, but thick as the circle of her thumb and forefinger—and she is practically salivating with desire. A whimper slides from her, and she receives a quick, cat-like grin in response. He leans forward until his hands are flat on the floor. His eyes never leave her as he crawls up her body, pausing here and there to taste her skin with his tongue.

Her back arches towards his mouth, offering him more. She's panting for air by the time he reaches her breasts. He laves his tongue over one fleshy mound, inching closer and closer to her erect nipple. She writhes beneath him, eager for his lips to wrap around the hard nub. Her hips are thrusting, searching for his erection, needing it to fill her. The tip rubs enticingly against her slit, causing a strangled cry to rip from her throat.

"Shh," he whispers against her skin, his lips gently vibrating against her breast. "Tell me what you want, baby. Anythin' and it's yours." Rachael looks down at him, her smoky blue eyes glazed with passion.

"You, please. I just want you," she manages to gasp out, her hands coming up to cup his cheeks and dragging him the rest of the way up her body. Her tongue stabs into his mouth as she slides one hand between them, gripping his throbbing shaft to bring it to her opening.

"Baby, wait. Rachael!" Ty manages to pull away from her delectable lips and resists her urging to drive himself into her. "I don't have any condoms," he says it quickly, curses his stupidity and thinks he might die if he can't get inside of her soon. She nips gently at his lip, a quiet sadness filling her eyes as she looks at him.

"It's all right. I-I can't have children." It's said so quietly, he's not quite sure he's heard her right. But the sheer, stark pain that floods through the desire in her eyes assures him that he did. An overwhelming sense of unfairness swells in his chest, making him silently curse God for allowing this beautiful creature to be barren when his cheating ex-wife had no such problems.

"'M so sorry, baby," he tells her, capturing her lips in a sweet, soft kiss that belies the throbbing need coiling inside of him. "There are other things to consider besides that, though," he reminds her.

"I know," she says simply. Her hand tugs gently on his cock, urging it forward. With a groan he can no longer deny either of them. The risk they are taking is great, they both

know. But, as he parts her folds and pushes into the soft, wet heat of her core, they both decide that the gain far outweighs the risk. "Oh, God," she breathes, her eyes closing with each inch as he fills her. Slowly, he enters, breathing shallowly to keep his control in check. *She's so tight, so warm,* he thinks—there's no way he'll last. She's already trying to thrust up to him, to take him fully inside and complete their joining. It's driving him mad.

Sweet Jesus, he thinks when he finally pushes all the way home. She fits him perfectly, contouring to him like a glove. She's mewling, her arms and legs coming to wrap around him and hold him close, her hips gyrating to try to take him in even further. One of his hands settles on her hip, and the other braces against the floor as he starts to thrust. Long, slow, powerful strokes, angled to drive ever deeper inside of her. Sweat makes their friction slick, softly spoken words make it frenzied. Each plunge drives them further, closer, over. She screams when she climaxes, her entire body going rigid for a brief second before collapsing. Her channel is clamping tight around him, pulling him, milking him for what he has. With a groan, he can hold on no more and he thrusts hard inside of her twice more.

He shudders as he comes inside of her, his breath ragged and harsh in her ears. She's still shaking herself when he recovers some and lifts himself off of her to settle on the floor. He pulls her close, his lips brushing across her temple. She curls into his embrace, breathing his scent deep and pressing a kiss on his chest. His left leg threads through hers and his hand is sliding along the expanse of her rib cage. He

can feel her breathing calm and her heart start to beat at its usual rhythm as reality returns. His euphoria is marred by the memory of her sad confession and the agony he had seen in her eyes. His heart breaks for her and he holds her even closer. It seems unfair to him that she shouldn't be able to be a mother. He has a feeling that if anybody in this world deserved children, it was Rachael Morton.

She snuggles against him, feels safe and warm in his powerful arms. Her satiated mind is somewhat amazed at this phenomenon. She can't ever remember feeling safe in a man's arms. Not even her father's. Of course, she's never been in this position with a man that actually seemed to *care* about her, even if only for this short time.

The kindness of strangers, she thinks, her tired mind playing it around like a tape recorder on a continuous loop.

"I really am sorry," he whispers, pressing a soft kiss to her hair. She shifts a bit and looks up at him, her brows drawn together in confusion.

"For what?"

"About the babies," he answers. A sad smile pulls at her lips in response to the very real empathy she sees in his eyes.

"It's okay. I came to terms with it years ago." He knows she's lying, can see it plainly in her eyes before she looks away. Instead of calling her on it, however, he just holds her closer and nuzzles her hair.

"You smell wonderful," he whispers, as his hand resumes its earlier wanderings. She gasps when it closes possessively around her breast, his rough palm grazing her nipple and making it throb.

"Thanks," she says on a breath. "I-I want you to know ... I don't do this normally." She has to fight to concentrate against what his gentle touch is doing to her brain. But she feels the need to get this out.

"What?" he sounds distracted, and she supposes he is if the hardness growing steadily against her thigh is any indication.

"This." She can feel her face flaming as she raises a hand to flutter it between them. A soft chuckle echoes in the ear he's started nibbling on. Warmth spreads through her to settle in her abdomen, a gentle pulse that surprises her. She's never really liked sex all that much before. Never saw the big deal. But something inside of her must have melted to make it possible for her to respond so freely to the barest of touches from him. She goes easily when she rolls onto his back, pulling her until she's sprawled across his chest and his erection is bumping against her entrance once more.

"Can't say 'm disappointed by that," he responds, rubbing his cock against her sizzling heat. Rachael's hips thrust in turn and a whimper slips from her throat. Before she has a chance to realize his intent, he grips her hip with one hand, urging her to raise up a bit so the other can snake between them. Her eyes go wide when she feels the tip of his shaft part her folds. "Sit up, baby." His voice is a strained growl, his eyes a deep quagmire of arousal. With unsteady hands and desire-filled eyes, she does as she asks, nearly crying out with how full she feels as he slides all the way inside.

It takes her a few seconds to figure out this new position in a mind so clouded with pleasure, she wasn't even sure she

knew her own name. Finally, the feel of him stretching her, the wonderful way he felt inside of her, she just gave up thinking and let her body take over. One hand settled on his stomach for balance and his hand on her hip helped keep her steady as he started to pump up into her. Her head is thrown back with the waves of bliss each trust crashes over her.

Ty watches her, his own pleasure heightened by how damn erotic she looks. A woman awakening to her body, learning what feels good and coming alive under his touch. He wants to take her, again and again, just to see that look of pure, blissful abandon on her face.

Her mouth is slack and her eyes closed. Sweat has broken out on her skin, making her seem to glow in the dim light from her Christmas tree. He groans in lusty appreciation of the golden goddess riding him hard, her inner walls clenching tight as she starts to fall over the edge. Her breasts are bouncing seductively with her movements, ripe and heavy and pink-tipped. He can't resist surging up and closing his mouth around one of the hard nubs.

"Oh, God!" she cries with the angle change, and she nearly collapses forward. Her hands are grasping desperately at his shoulders as her movements speed up. Her clit is throbbing with each thrust, threatening to explode any second. She looks down and watches as his tongue and lips tease her nipple. His hands tighten on her hips, guiding her to move harder. Their pelvises are slamming together with erratic force, their breaths coming out in incoherent moans.

Suddenly, Rachael shrieks as her climax slams into her, her fingers digging hard into his shoulders and raising blood.

Ty is right behind her, his final, hard thrust making her collapse against him. She can feel him, pulsing deep inside of her, filling her womb with his seed that would never take root. This saddens her more then she thinks it should and she buries her face in his neck to hide her tears.

He feels them, however, hot and wet against his skin. He slowly lowers them back to the floor and holds her trembling form close. His hands slide over her back, trying to soothe her as they both calm.

"I'm sorry," she says after a minute, her voice muffled and thick. "I'm s-sorry."

"For what, baby? You have nothin' to be sorry for," he says, his voice tender. She's still quietly crying, but her trembling from her climax and her emotion is starting to ease. His hands feel good on her back, kneading away the tension in long, smooth strokes. Her breathing starts to even out and she raises up a little to meet his eyes.

"You're a nice man," she tells him, giggling through her sadness at the way his eyes bug.

"Not sure that's the thing a man wants to hear after he's just had one of the best sexual experiences of his life," he says, his cerulean eyes twinkling. She laughs again, then sniffles. Then, she rests her forehead against his and sighs.

"Well, it's true." she says again, smiling.

"If you say so. Don't know too many people who would agree, though," he gives a wry grin and tilts his head to kiss her.

"Are you hungry?" The question is so sudden, he blinks at her dumbly for a second. "I'm suddenly very, very hungry," she continues.

"Guess I could eat," he says with a smile. She flashes him a real smile now and starts to climb off of him, both of them groaning as he slips out of her body. He rolls easily to his feet, and stretches, the movement reminding her of a cat. She grabs her shirt off the floor and pulls it over her head, then turns to see him watching her.

"What?" She feels a bit self-conscious—strange considering what they've been doing. She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, then realizes she must look a mess. She slides her hands through the dark gold mass and groans when she can't seem to get it to lie straight.

"You're stunning, you know that?" She blushes, the compliment warming her even as she thinks he's just being nice.

"See, nice man." She thinks this makes her point and moves to stand up.

"You think 'm sayin' it to be nice?" She hears the edge of steel that has come into his voice, and her gaze darts away from trying to find her pants, up to him. She can see the anger clenching his jaw and her eyes widen.

"W-why else w-w-would you s-say it? I know I'm not pretty," she stammers, recoiling a little from the flash of heat in his eyes.

"You don't know much, then. I'd love to meet whoever stuck these crazy ideas in your head. 'Cause I would break his fucking neck." The violence in his words is very real. She

finds herself taking a moment to envision him doing just that to her father, but guilt quickly rears its head.

"Nobody. But, I do have a mirror. I can see for myself."

"Stop it. Just ... stop. As long as I am in this house you will not speak about yourself like that." Her eyes widen even further with how formal and *angry* he sounds. She blinks once, trying to process this, before nodding.

"O-okay," is all she can think of to say. He stares at her for a long minute then gives a short nod.

"Good. D'you mind if I smoke?" He's already reaching for his coat, rifling through the pockets to find his pack. Something gold and round falls out and lands with a soft thump on the carpet and Chessy—who has decided to make her presence known—pounces. "Hey, now. Go on," Ty bats at the cat and pushes her away from the object.

"What's that?" Rachael asks, forgetting about putting any more clothes on, and walks over to him. He sighs and holds it out, the warm, smooth gold of the ring shining in the dim light.

"My wedding ring," he says, letting her take it before getting a cigarette. She hasn't said no, so he just goes ahead and lights up as she stares at the ring.

"You're married?" It's quiet, and almost inaudible, but he hears it over the snap-hiss of his lighter. He takes a drag and mentally kicks himself for not explaining better.

"No. 'M not. Officially divorced as of today. At least, when I sign the papers I will be. Course, it's all just formality now." She looks up at him curiously, her smoky blue eyes seeming to stare straight into his brain. "We've been separated for a

long time," he says on an exhalation of smoke. She nods and hands him the ring back.

"Why do you still carry it?"

"I dunno," he replies, with a shrug. He looks down at the simple band, twisting it in his fingers to see it catch the light. "Maybe to remind me marriage wasn't the problem. It was the girl." He palms the ring and slides it back into his coat, then drops it onto the back of her sofa. "So, you were saying something about food?"

"Yeah. This way." She offers him a smile then moves around him to head toward the kitchen. She doesn't say anything about his sudden subject change. She understands it. What she doesn't understand is how he can walk around so casually not wearing a stitch of clothing.

* * * *

"Ms. Morton?" They've rooted through her refrigerator and came up with some pasta salad and some leftover KFC chicken, and each had a soda. They found that they were both hungrier than they thought and quickly made short work of the food. Rachael had just sat down from taking their dishes and empty food containers to the sink, while Ty perused the fridge one last time for dessert, when his overly formal use of her name drew her attention. She turned and looked at him, a hard, sharp pang of excitement bolting through her when her eyes land on him. As naked as the day he was born, his hair a tousled mess on his head and a smirk planted firmly on his mouth, he was probably the most delicious thing she'd ever seen.

"Y-yes?" Her eyes widen when she sees the can of whipped cream he is holding. All sorts of naughty images burst into her mind, and she suddenly feels as if the thin cotton of her shirt is stifling her.

"Please remove your shirt, then turn in your chair." He sounds like a director, telling her where to stand under the lights. But the heat in his eyes is scorching. Without further direction, she pulls the shirt over her head and watches as he advances, steadily shaking the can. "Good girl. Now, rest your back against the wall." He waits while she adjusts herself, her stormy eyes darkening with anticipation. "Good, good." He kneels down and rests a hand on her knee, his eyes staring into hers with so much intensity it steals her breath. With his next words, a flood of wetness rushes to her core and her abdomen spasms with desire.

"Now," he begins, his voice a husky growl that makes her shiver. "Spread yourself out for me." Eagerly, her knees fall apart and her back arches, her eyelids heavy as she looks down at him. He takes a moment to gaze hungrily at her pink, glistening center, the long silkiness of her legs, the soft lushness of her stomach and the heavy ripeness of her breasts. She is a wonderful feast for a man who's been starving until today.

She gasps when the cool, frothy dessert topping lands on the overheated skin of her breast. The cream starts to melt almost immediately, its delicate texture no match for her aroused flesh. He takes his time, carefully working the nozzle around one nipple, then the other. She giggles when he shoots a mound of the white stuff into her belly button, then

moans when the nozzle slides inside her cleft, dispensing the whipped cream into the very center of her. The feel of it on her clit is cool and feather-like, teasing her with what was to come.

"I think it's time for dessert," he growls, before he starts to lick his handiwork away from her skin. His tongue works his way over her torso, the pressure both firm and soft, rough and gentle. She's heaving in great gulps of air and she has to clutch the chair in an effort to keep from sliding to the floor in a puddle at his feet. Her moans become louder the lower he goes, the tingles intensify to waves as he works his way slowly towards his goal. She gives a giggle-filled gasp when his tongue delves into her navel, licking it clean.

He pauses once he reaches her cream-filled center and she manages to bring her gaze to his in confusion of what's taking so long. His eyes never leave hers as he dips his head and stabs his tongue inside her channel, gathering the cream before swiping up the slit to suck gently on her clit.

"Oooohhhhh," her hips thrust against his mouth, seeking the pleasure he's offering. He licks her clean, alternating between fucking her with his tongue and sucking on her clit. Then he pulls back to apply more cream, sliding the slim nozzle into her body for a few thrusts before bringing his tongue back to her sensitive flesh. She can't sit still under his ministrations. It feels too good, she wants it too bad. In the back of her mind she knows she'll never be able to look at a can of RediWhip the same way again. Or her kitchen for that matter. But she didn't care right then. Not when his tongue was there, doing that.

Ty decides he could do this for hours. The sweet topping mixes with her natural salty-sweetness, making her more delicious then any confection he's ever tasted before. She's so responsive to his touch, so eager for it. It's the most arousing thing he's ever experienced.

He stops several times, bringing her just to the edge before stopping to apply more whipped cream. She's trembling from the denied release and the exertion of holding onto the chair. Sweat has broken out again, dampening her hair and skin and making it almost impossible to *stay* in the chair. His name fell from her lips over and over on little pants of air. She's half delirious with pleasure by the time he finally takes pity on her. He slides two fingers into her clenching heat and wraps his lips around her throbbing clit, sucking hard.

"Oh, oh, YES!" She explodes in a crashing wave of colors and sounds, her grip on the chair finally lost. The only thing keeping her in the seat is Ty's hand on her thigh, urging her thighs apart even wider so he can lap up her juices as she comes.

It takes several moments for her to come back to herself. When she opens her eyes again, she's surprised to see him still poised between her legs, his eyes watching her intently, his mouth and chin still glistening from her orgasm. She leans forward, rather shakily, grasps his face in her hands and pulls him to her. Her mouth closes over his and she can taste herself and the whipped cream on his tongue. In that moment, she wants to return the pleasure he's just given her more than anything.

With a gentle tug, he rises to his feet, their lips parting with wet suction. He watches as she studies his jutting erection like a painter would his subject. She takes the can from his hand, gives it a quick shake. His hands curl into loose fists when her fingers close around him, the feel of her warm hand on his thick, hard flesh torture. But he keeps himself from thrusting into her grip. This is her show and he hands himself over to her mercy.

He hisses in a breath at the feel of her hand exploring his cock. He groans when her thumb rubs over the head, then presses experimentally on the base of it.

"Jesus." He reaches out blindly for something to hold onto and leans gratefully on the wall when he finds it. Rachael sprays a dollop of the whipped cream around the head of his cock then down the shaft to the root. She inspects her work while he struggles to stay standing. He's throbbing painfully with need, desperate for her to wrap those full, sweet lips around his dick. "God, Rachael. Please." Her eyes shoot to his, surprise that he's begging evident on her features. Then a purely feminine smile curls her lips.

Her tongue snakes out to swipe through the cream crowning the head, making him groan in frustration at the ghostly contact. "Tease," he breathes, unable to resist the urge to tangle his fingers in her hair. His hand tenses and his knees nearly buckle when she opens her mouth and slides him inside the hot, wet cavern. She takes him in until he bumps the back of her throat, then lets him slide almost free from her lips before repeating. She's not entirely sure what

she's doing, but the way he's grunting and groaning and gasping her name, she figures she's doing all right.

If Ty could read her thoughts, he would have told her she is doing an amazing job. As she pumps him into her mouth, her tongue is in constant motion over his flesh, her teeth occasionally scrape lightly to add a sense of danger to the pleasure. She palms his balls with one hand, massages and caresses them with her nimble fingers. It's not long before his control snaps. He reaches down and seizes her shoulder, pulling her up to her feet with one swift move. She doesn't quite realize what's going on until she sees the predatory gleam in his eyes. With a swipe of his arm, everything that was on the table scatters to the floor and she finds herself bent over it, her cheek pressing against the cool wood as he drives into her from behind. As amazing as her mouth had felt on him, he wants to be inside her when he comes. To watch his cock as it slides in and out of her body, glistening with her juices.

It only takes a few hard thrusts before he is roaring with his release. All Rachael can do is hold on as she comes and comes, her satisfaction not coming from an orgasm this time. Instead, it comes from her apparent ability to make him crazy with want. It's a heady feeling.

He collapses against her back and she can feel his heart stampede in his chest and his breath is a ragged pant in her ear. When he's calm enough to move, he presses a kiss between her shoulder blades; then peels himself off of her. She lets out a laugh as he helps her stand.

"I'm sticky," she says, her flesh resisting letting go of the table.

"Time for a bath then, eh?" He lets out a chuckle, then spies the stuff on the floor. Luckily, it was just a napkin holder and salt and pepper shakers, and nothing broke. "Then, I'll, uh, help you clean this up."

"Uhm, yeah. Heh." She lets out a squeal when she finds herself scooped up in his arms.

"Come on then, let's go wash up." Something tells her as he carries her effortlessly through the apartment, that 'washing up' is going to be a whole lot dirtier than it sounds.

Part Three

Water splashes gently against the sides of the tub as they settle into it together. The radio on the shelf above the sink is on, and Rachael hums softly along with *Silver Bells* as she lets the warm water soothe her. Ty is in front of her, his head pillowed on her breasts, his soft hair tickling her skin. She's a bit surprised that the tub can hold them both, though it was one of the reasons she'd rented this apartment. It is deep and long and just perfect for after-work soaks to get out the kinks of a long night. And apparently after a few hours of mind blowing sex.

He's gently rubbing a washcloth over her bent knee and down her calf and back up again. She's not sure if he's actually getting anything clean, but it feels too good to really care. She can't remember a time when she has ever felt this peaceful, this content. Last year at this time, she'd been back on the farm, watching her mother waste away as the cancer ate her from the inside out. She had pretty much accepted it then that Christmas would never be the same for her again.

"Thank you," she says, before she can even think to stop herself.

"For what?" he asks, inclining his head a little to try to get a peek at her face. It's not the easiest angle, so he just snuggles further into her embrace and closes his eyes. Her fingers play softly along his shoulders and arms, raising gooseflesh, even as the warm water steams around them.

"This isn't an ... easy time of year for me. Thank you for making it better," she says simply, pressing a kiss to the top of his dark head.

"More than welcome. And I can say you've returned the favor." He grabs one of her hands and brings it to his lips, rubbing them against his mouth before placing a kiss on them. "What happened to you?" he asks quietly, wondering even as he says it if he's stepping over some invisible line they've put up between themselves without realizing they had. She's quiet for so long, he begins to think that he has. Then, she sighs, the sound so world weary and sad he wants to cradle her in his arms forever.

"My mother died." It's said quickly and quietly, but there was no missing the pain that coated the words. He sits up and turns to face her, his hand coming up to cup her cheek. Neither notice the water that clings to his skin, or the way the drops transfer to hers, to slide down her cheek in an imitation of the tears gathering in her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Rachael," he says, knowing it isn't enough, but hoping it might give her some semblance of comfort. He leans forward—carefully, so as not to slip—and captures her mouth with his. He can taste her sadness on her tongue, can feel it pouring from her and into him. She smiles weakly when he pulls back, her hand coming up to clutch his, her thumb rubbing across the back in a silent thanks.

"She was sick for a long time. And tired. I think she was ready to go."

"When?" She sighs and blinks back tears, but still manages to keep the smile on her lips.

"New Year's. I went back home for Christmas, just to see her. She kept telling me I didn't have to, that she was fine ... but I could hear it in her voice that she wasn't. I had been paying her medical expenses for a long time, so I knew that it wasn't as rosy as she tried to make me think. Not to mention my dad always calling. Trying to get me to come home. Finally, I did. And that was the last Christmas we spent together." Her words were laced with a bone deep bitterness that he wasn't sure he wanted to understand. Something told him, by the way she had said 'my dad,' that the man was the root of it all. And if he got confirmation of that, Ty just might do something that would get him in very deep trouble.

"At least you got that last holiday together. Some folks don't even get that," he said, the words sounding lame to his own ears. His parents had long ago divorced and married other people. But the loss of a parent through divorce was nothing compared to a loss through death.

"No, I guess not. Doesn't make it hurt any less, though," she counters.

"I suppose not," he murmurs softly, before turning back around to settle against her. The only sound for a few minutes is the Christmas carols playing softly from the radio. Chessy has nosed her way into the bathroom at some point and is sitting on the closed toilet seat, her yellow eyes thinned to slits as she looks at the humans in the tub. She twitches when Rachael stretches her leg, but she doesn't move other than that.

"What about you?" Rachael shifts a bit to relieve the tingling that's starting in her butt from sitting in one position

too long, then rests her chin on the top of his head. She knows they should be washing or something, but just being like this with him is too comfortable. Even the thought of her mother didn't hurt as bad as it usually did. She hopes that the relief will continue long after Ty's walked out her door and gone back to his life.

"What's that?" He pretends that he didn't hear her. Not because he doesn't want to tell her, but because he doesn't want to have to say the words out loud. Even when he'd explained it to his father, he'd used gestures and left things hanging, hoping that old George would get the idea. Lucky for him his father was an astute man.

"What happened that makes you sad at Christmas."

"Oh, that," he says nonchalantly, waving a dismissive hand in the air. Water flies from his fingers to land on the cat, who meows indignantly; then jumps off the toilet. They both chuckle when she saunters out, tail twitching in the air. "Well, sorry, kitty."

"She'll get over it. I do that all the time. I don't know why she comes in here when I'm taking a shower. She always gets one too." Rachael explains with a laugh. "I left my ex-wife." Rachael blinks, confusion marring her brow for a split second. Then realization settles over her.

"Oh," is all she can say for a minute. She notes that he doesn't sound devastated and that his voice isn't coated with pain. But there is a certain amount of weary acceptance. Like he doesn't really care for what happened, but there is no changing it now. "Why?"

"She got pregnant." Now she hears pain in his voice and she wonders at it.

"You don't like children?"

He feels her tense a bit behind him and shakes his head.

"No, s'not that. I love children. Always wanted a huge passel of 'em running around. No, her bein' pregnant wasn't the problem. It was who the father was, that was."

"Oh," she says again, completely stumped as to what to say to that. "I take it, it wasn't you?"

"Nope," he replies, popping the 'p.' "Was my best friend's. Or former best friend, I should say. Couldn't really stomach talkin' to him after I found out what he'd done." No, she didn't suppose he could have. "And the bitch told me last Christmas. Came home from a trip like this, determined to get there before midnight so we could spend the whole day together. When I walk in, there's soft lights, music, candles. She's waitin' for me with champagne. The works. She's wearing one of those filmy gown things. She actually smiled when she saw me. *Smiled.* Like she wasn't about to rip my heart out and stomp it under her delicate little heel." She can feel him practically vibrating with remembered anger, his words taking on a sharper edge the more he says.

"It's okay. You don't have to say any more," She rubs her hands along his arms, trying to ease the tension in them.

"It's all right. I want to tell you. Never actually said the words out loud." He sounds distant. Almost like he's back at that night where the woman who had vowed to love him forever had betrayed him the worst possible way. "She gave me a kiss and I said some shit about her glowing. She

laughed. She always had this real magical laugh that reminded me of fairies and elves and the like. What an idiot I was." He gives a bitter, rueful laugh and snatches her hand off his arm. He rubs his chin absently along her knuckles, his eyes staring, unfocused, at the plain white tile of the wall. He can feel the anger in him like a balloon in his chest, pressure building until he thinks he might burst with it. Even now, after all this time, the thought of how she looked that night can make his blood boil. "Then she tells me I must congratulate her. I ask her for what, with some simperin' look of adoration on m' face I'm sure. Her eyes flash. Amazing eyes, really. Blue, but not warm like yours. Like ice. Clear as any winter day with the ability to freeze you with a look."

He snorts at himself, scoffing at the man who had been in love with Julianne. Rachael keeps touching him, stroking his skin with the hand he's not holding, to ease away the pain she can hear in his voice. She can feel the prick of tears at the back of her eyes for him and she finds that it is possible to hate someone you have never met.

"She says 'Dear, dear Tyler, I'm going to be a mother.' Well, I went clear over the moon. I was so excited. A baby!" He sounds so wistful, so full of longing Rachael wraps her free arm around him and holds him close. He sighs in her embrace but doesn't quite relax. He turns his face to nuzzle her breast with his cheek, seeking her scent to fill his head and replace the images of his ex-wife. "Then, as I'm prancing around getting ready to call my dad and tell him, she starts to laugh again. But, it's brittle, cold. And the eyes that look at me aren't my Julianne's. Or, maybe they were, and I was just too

blind to see before." He's wishing desperately for a cigarette right now, but they are out in the living room. Sighing, he continues, speaking quickly just to get the rest of it out. "'My silly, pretty one,' she says, taking a sip of champagne. 'I said I was going to be a mother. I didn't say anythin' about you being a daddy.'"

"Shh, just stop. It doesn't matter now. I'm so sorry, Ty. So sorry," she cuts him off, unable to stand anymore of the heartbreak in his voice. Somehow, she shifts and turns and lifts his chin to cover his mouth with hers. It's her turn to taste the pain on his tongue and she's not surprised to find it bitter. There're tears streaking down his face, hot and salty and mingling with their kiss. She's not sure he's even aware of them. She goes easily when his arms convulse around her, allowing him to shift and tug until their positions are reversed. She's now straddling his thighs, her knees digging into the unforgiving sides of the tub. She doesn't care though. All she cares about is stripping the hurt away from this man and giving him only happiness.

Her lips never leave his as she raises her hips a fraction and takes his hard shaft deep inside. Water sloshes crazily over the sides, soaking the floor, but she doesn't care. They come together hard, fast, each trying to purge the inner emptiness they've been carrying around for too long. Their orgasms build quickly, and soon they are gasping and clinging to each other, whispering each other's names. Rachael's inner walls are still fluttering around his cock when he pulls back to look at her. He cups her face tenderly, arousal clouding the sharp blue, and taking away some of the haunted pain.

"You're a hell of a woman, Rachael Morton." The denial springs to her lips almost immediately. But this time, she holds back. She looks into his eyes and can finally see herself reflected in them. He's not saying this to be nice, or to get her into bed—too late for that. He really means it. The realization has fresh tears sliding out of her eyes to wash over his hand and a wide smile curving her full mouth.

"You're one hell of a man, Tyler Jennings," she whispers back. Then, they are kissing again, their bodies moving together easily at a slow pace. There's no rush this time, no hurry to forget painful memories. They rock gently together, each thrust designed to keep climax at bay for as long as possible. Their kisses are soft, searching and languid. Rachael wants this moment to last forever. She feels so warm, so free, so wanted. It's something she's only experienced in her mother's arms, and it's intoxicating to be experiencing it with a man for the first time. Regret that this is a one time deal tries to sour the bliss singing through her veins, but she squelches it.

No regrets, she thinks, as her body can hold out no more and sends her spiraling over the edge. Ty is right behind her, her name falling from his lips like a prayer, his fingers bruising on her hips as he buries himself deep inside her warmth. They collapse together in the tub, and stay like that, despite discomfort, until the water has long gone cool.

* * * *

It's nearing nine-thirty on Christmas day, and Ty is sitting on the couch in Rachael's living room, wearing nothing but his

suit pants, smoking a cigarette. In front of him on her low, oak coffee table, are the divorce papers. But, he's not looking at them. Not yet. His mind is replaying everything that had happened over the last several, wonderful hours. After they had made love the second time in the bathroom—he refuses to think of it as anything else—they disentangled long enough to get out and clean up the water. Then, they'd fallen into her bed, where he took her over and over, between short naps.

He figured they'd only gotten a good two hours of uninterrupted sleep before her phone had rung. At six a.m. He'd slipped out of bed to give her some privacy and went to the kitchen to feed his raging appetite. For food. When he went back into the room, she was sitting on the edge of the bed, glaring at the phone.

"My father needs money," she had said as her only explanation, the anger and resentment in her voice thick enough to choke on. He put down the bowl of steaming oatmeal he had brought in for her and started to kiss those harsh feelings away. He successfully drove out all images of her father with each thrust into her and he was satisfied that by the time she was clawing at his back and shrieking his name that the man was completely forgotten. Then they had feasted on the near-cold oatmeal and the coffee she had gotten up long enough to brew, watching Christmas specials.

By the time Santa had made his way down Main Street in Disney World, the oatmeal was gone, and they had made love another three times. He wasn't sure where this addiction for her was coming from. But something told him it would be a long, long time before he was sated. After the last time,

however, their bodies started to protest the overexertion. They weren't physically used to this lustful marathon, so obviously a break was in order.

They spent the rest of the day playing games. That she smoked him at poker should have bruised his ego. But she had looked so cute every time she won, doing a little dance in her seat and fixing him with a smile so bright it was blinding, he couldn't seem to make himself care. Around three they made dinner. A Cornish hen roasted with olive oil and rosemary, baby carrots sautéed in honey and butter, and creamy garlic mashed potatoes. The fact that she was such a good cook was not lost on him and he wondered why the hell she was working in a diner. Then, he remembered the phone call that morning from her father, and he had sneaking suspicion that man was the culprit.

They knew that their time was coming to a close after they did the dinner dishes. It was almost five. In a few hours, Christmas would be over and he would be headed back to his life in California and she would resume hers here. Fatigue was forgotten and soreness ignored as they spent the next couple of hours memorizing each other's bodies. The way she sounded when she came, the way he looked when she took him fully into her mouth. It was after the last time, though, that Rachael finally gave out. She fell into a sleep so sound that she didn't even stir when he slid out of bed to go smoke a cigarette.

And now, here he sat, staring at the papers, and wishing he could just stay here with her. It would be so easy to check out of his hotel, cash in his plane ticket for the next day and

just go curl up back in bed with her. Easy. But he wasn't entirely sure if it was right *or* welcome. They had made no promises to each other, no guarantees. This was one time. An island of calm in the storm that had been their lives over the last year. Perhaps even longer for her.

There was also the consideration that neither of them might be ready to deal with a *real* relationship right now. Physical attraction was one thing. Converting that into forever was a different beast entirely.

No, it was better to end it like this. They could walk away from each other, without pain or regret. *Yeah, no regrets,* his sarcastic inner voice chimed. He ignores it and grinds out his cigarette in a cheap glass bowl she had provided for him. With another sigh, he leans forward and stares down at the empty signature line above his name. He hasn't signed them before now because of some childish notion that when he did, Julianne would somehow win. Ridiculous, of course. Especially when she wouldn't be getting much more than she had come into the marriage with. Five hundred thousand dollars wasn't more than a chump of change to the Jennings family fortune. Ty sent out a silent thanks to his dear old dad for insisting on the pre-nup. And that, for once, he had listened to the old man.

With another sigh, he reaches for his coat and pulls out a gold-plated pen. A second passes, then two, before he finally twists the barrel and exposes the tip. A sudden urge to get it over with brings the pen to the paper and he quickly scratches his name across the line. It was done. A strong

sense of relief fills him and he wonders why he had even hesitated in the first place.

A soft chime brings his eyes to the clock hung on the wall. Nine o'clock. He has an early flight and he still has to collect his things from his hotel room. It was time to get going.

It takes surprisingly little time to wipe his presence from her apartment. After all, all he'd brought with him were his clothes and himself. He has a feeling, as he walks back into her bedroom and stares down at her peacefully sleeping form, that he will be leaving a part of himself behind. He shoves his hands in his pants pockets and looks at her, fighting the urge to chuck his clothes and climb back into bed. His fingers brush across the cool metal of his ring and he pulls it out. It catches the light from the few candles lit around the room and shines as he twists it in his fingers.

Then, without letting himself think about the appropriateness of leaving a ring he had worn with another woman, he reaches over and places it on the pillow which still held the impression from when he'd lain on it. With one, last gentle kiss to her temple, and her scent still lingering in his nose, he leaves.

She waits until she hears the soft click of the front door closing behind him before opening her eyes and reaching out to take the ring. A lone tear slides down her face as she puts it on her middle finger. She watches it glint in the candle light for a second, before pulling the pillow he'd used to her and burying her face in it. She loses herself in his scent and pretends it's him, closing her eyes and forcing herself to go

back to sleep, the gentle throb between her legs a steady reminder that their time was over.

* * * *

Three months later, Baltimore

"So, you have class tonight?" Amy Logan, a pretty young brunette with a habit of babbling when she's nervous, asks Rachael as she takes off her apron for the night.

"Yeah." Rachael says with a smile. It's been three months since Ty came and went from her life, but the ring still shines on her hand, a constant reminder. Not that he's completely gone, of course. Every week, a new postcard comes. They are never signed, but she *knows* they are from him They always say 'miss you,' or 'thinking of you,' or something else short and sweet and guaranteed to make her heart race and her knees turn to jelly. She's managed to stop looking for him every time the bell above the door to the diner jingles, but the postcards give her a sense of hope that they are far from through. And even if they weren't a factor, what she held in the envelope in her hand was.

"How are you feeling today? No sickies?" Amy wipes down her tray and studies the blonde with critical green eyes. She had come to work there about two weeks after New Year's Day. She was a student, working at both the diner and the dance club part-time to supplement her student loans. She was living with a guitar player named Mick, by whom Rachael had been struck speechless the first time she'd seen him. He was gorgeous. And he was so *nice*. Nothing like her initial impression of rock musicians.

The girls had become fast friends, a fact that Rachael attributed to Ty. He made her feel like she deserved life and friendship and all those other things that made human existence worth living. So it hadn't really been strange that she had immediately told Amy the first time she had gotten sick. The entire story had spilled out, and Amy had sworn she'd never heard anything as romantic as that. Ever.

"No, no sickies," Rachael says with a laugh. "Which is good, because I have a quiz tonight." She folds her apron and tucks her tips into her purse. Then, she hefts her backpack—which contains a change of clothes, her books and some vitamins—before pulling her hair out of its ponytail to relieve the ache forming at the back of her head.

"Well, good luck. And call me tomorrow. Mick's playing this weekend and we'd love for you to come."

"Will do. Bye."

"Bye." Rachael walks out of the diner and takes a deep breath of night air. It smells fresh and clean, and it brings a smile to her face. It's early evening and she got off just a few minutes late waiting for one of her tables to check out. So she takes off for a brisk walk towards the campus. The diner's owner had nearly had a heart attack when she informed him she was going back to school. He had even tried to talk her out of it, telling her she was too old to try to get a degree. But she held fast. No more would she allow herself to be dictated by men. Not him and most definitely not her father. The next time *he* had called demanding money, she had suggested he get a job, or better yet, Carl could get off his ass and do something productive for once. Then, she had

hung up on her sputtering father with a smile on her face. She hasn't heard from him since.

It amazed her, the changes she's gone through in the past months. She hardly ever stuttered anymore, and rarely backed down when she thought she was right. She liked to think that Ty left behind some of this strength, to help her get through the days.

She feels a small flutter in her stomach and smiles, then rubs a hand absently over it. She sees the campus up ahead and increases her pace even more. She's not really settled on a major yet. She's taking a few classes that strike her fancy, until she decides. Tonight, it's women's studies. On Fridays, it's classical writers. And on Sunday, it's Lamaze.

With a sigh, she pauses by the mailbox outside of the lecture hall and looks down at the name printed on the front of the envelope. *Tyler Jennings*. She was a little surprised that it was so easy to find his address. But after an evening spent on the Internet, with a very determined Amy, they found the website of his family's store in San Diego. She'd had it for a couple of weeks now, but she had to be sure before she sent him this. Inside the envelope was a small black and white picture. Easy to overlook, really, if it weren't carefully attached to the one line note she had written.

I think he has your eyes.

"Come on, Rachael. You're gonna be late." Her head jerks to the side to see the smiling face of Sara Remington, a girl six years her junior.

"Ok, I'm coming." Rachael quickly drops the letter inside the mailbox and double checks to make sure it dropped.

Then, she quickly trots up the stares to join the dark-haired girl, their laughter rising up to be swallowed in the clear, night air.

The End

About the Author:

Lisa Marie lives in Maryland with her husband, two kids, mom and assorted animals. Lisa worked for two years in an online writing community, honing her skills until she felt confident enough to try her hand at getting published. When she's not writing or working at her day job, Lisa likes to read, play video games and has an unapologetic addiction to CSI.

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