



Bet on a Mistletoe

By

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Chapter One

"Damnit! Damnit! Damnit!" she yelled and banged her fist on the steering wheel of her car. "Give me a break!" She stared out the window and watched smoke bellowing from her car like chimney fire.

"Only my car would over heat in the dead of winter while it was snowing."

Her throat became tight and she struggled not to cry. This was not her year at all.

Peering out the windshield, it was dark except for the beam of light from her car. She didn't expect to see anything and she didn't. The winding two-lane road was bare at ten o'clock at night. Twenty miles from town or the center of Carlton County and there wasn't a soul in sight to give her aid. Glancing down at the thermostat gauge as the needle bobbed high, she sighed.

The temperature was dropping fast outside, she could only hope her car would cool off quick and allow her to inch up the road until she reached her childhood home.

Dropping her head on the steering wheel, ready to give into a gut-wrenching 'woe is me' she heard a tapping on her window. Her heart thumped, she couldn't see who it was with the light dusting of snow covering the glass.

She prayed it wasn't some escaped criminal. Rolling the window down halfway she peeped out. A blast of icy wind greeted her, as it quickly sucked the warmth out of the car. Blinded by a wide-beam flashlight, she squinted at the shadow behind the light.

"I saw your car on the side of the road, do you need assist..." The words drifted away. "Well, I'll be damn! Lorna Morgan."

"It's me." Lorna still couldn't see who was out there. Raising her hand, she tried to shield her eyes and get a glimpse of the person.

The light moved to a different angle, and her vision was filled with the most devastating, blue eyes she'd ever seen--cerulean blue. She remembered them being sexier when viewed with midnight black hair that curved just right at the tips. "Richard Patterson."

"In the flesh," he smiled. "With the steam coming up from your hood, I'd say you're having a little bit of car trouble."

His strong southern lilt showered her with warmth. A sound she didn't hear often living in D.C.

"A little." This would not have been the way she wanted to present herself in town after nine years. "It runs hot at times. I figure, I'll just wait it out. As cold as it is, it shouldn't take too long." She hoped.

"That's just silly. It's too cold to sit out here by yourself. I'll give you a lift to your parent's house and the car will be fine 'til morning."

Unable to argue with that logic, she rolled up the window and grabbed her purse. It wasn't that she didn't want a ride; it all had to do with being sealed in a small space with Richard. Or Dick as he'd gone by in high school. The bad boy, with too much cockiness for any girl's good. No one in a skirt was immune to his charm, especially not her.

Fortifying her strength with a deep breath, she opened the car door and got out. Unfortunately, Richard hadn't moved from his position beside her car and they now stood so close she could feel the material of his thick jacket brush the front of her wool pea coat.

"You're shivering. No longer used to this mountain winter?" He grasped her shoulders in his strong hands. "Why don't you get in the truck, and I'll get your suitcase out the car."

Speechless, she nodded and passed him her keys. There was no way she was going to correct Richard and tell him that her chill had nothing to do with the mountain temperature and everything to do with him. Her thick boots made a crunch sound in the snow as she walked toward his vehicle.

Once inside she watched him move with quick efficiency. His body was a shadow in the night, but she still enjoyed the view. In high school he'd kept his body in shape by playing football and baseball.

She wondered what he did now. Shaking her head, she chided herself, "Lorna, he was none of your business then and he sure isn't now."

Opening up the back door, he slid in her matching suitcases, then jogged around the front of the car and got in.

"Man, it's going to be a good winter this year." He winked at her.

Still the charmer.

He pulled the hat off his head, and tossed it on the dashboard. His dark hair curled around his collar and his forehead. It made her want to reach out and feel the silkiness curl around her fingers. She balled her hands into fists, to restrain herself.

"I was shocked to see the snow. It's usually just cold every year." She confirmed, trying not to watch the movement of his body as he secured his seatbelt and shifted the truck into drive.

"About three years ago, we got some flurries that settled but they were gone by morning. Maybe this time it will stay around long enough for the town folk to enjoy it."

"Hopefully."

"So, what made you decide to come home this year? Usually, your parents go visit you, but they said that you'd made other plans."

Word in Carlton County spread quickly. Everyone knew everything about everyone.

"Maybe I wanted to surprise them." She made the mistake of glancing at him. Those blue eyes seized her for a moment, arresting her in the dim interior, before he refocused on the road. They had searched her face, as if trying to seek out the truth of her words. There was a kindness in his gaze that touched her heart.

Turning to the side, she stared out of the small clearing in her window and watched the dark shadows along the road.

"That's your right."

It was her right and her business. Then why did she feel the need to tell him the problems that weighed on her.

"I'm sure your parents are going to love seeing you. Hell, I'm glad to see you. But, if you didn't have the money I'm sure they would've come to you like always."

Her head snapped around to face him at those words. "What? What makes you think that I don't have money?" A dry chuckle bubbled passed her lips as she folded her arms under her breasts. It wasn't as if she had holes in her clothes.

"Look, Lorna, I'm not trying to be in your business. But, most people who decide to take a nine hour trip for the holiday do it with a functioning car."

Gritting her teeth, she said, "Anyone's car can run hot."

"Especially that one. What is it, a nineteen ninety-one?" He laughed.

"It's a foreign car. They have a long life span. It's like a classic."

"Old is what it is."

She opened her mouth to deny it, when he cut her off.

"It frequently over heats, the tires are bald, the paint is more gone than there, and you have to wiggle the key so many times in the lock to get the trunk open, I thought it would break off."

Damn. He'd pinned her down like a donkey at a birthday party missing a tail. She drummed her fingers on her arms and sat in the car silently.

"Not to mention all the wheels on your suitcase have broken off."

Closing her eyes, she tried to stave off the tears. Richard had read her so well all her feelings of shame that had followed her every mile seemed to overtake her at once.

"Lorna, talk to me. I promise not to judge you."

It was a combination between the softness of his voice and the warmth of his hand on her thigh that coaxed her to open her eyes and gaze at him.

"Oh, baby, don't cry." He rubbed her thigh.

Those words made her cry. She knew she needed to talk to someone. Not wanting to burden her parents with her problems, until she'd figured out a plan. "Richard, I don't want my business all over town."

His voice was gruff as he said, "I'm not a gossip. I'll keep your confidence."

His thumb stroked her leg, a comforting gesture that had a totally different effect on her. Fireflies raced up her thigh and seated themselves at the crotch of her jeans. The thought that if he just moved his hand up a few inches he could palm her sex made her clit throb and juices flood her panties. Biting down on her lip, she took a deep breath in through her nose. She did everything to keep herself from wiggling in her seat or forcing his hand up to the place that yearned for his touch. The tightness in her nipples and the rapid beat of her heart reminded her Richard was not just an old friend. Her first wet dream had featured this man when she had just turned sixteen and they hadn't stopped.

Nothing like a good bout of sex to ease her depression. But, she'd never been in Richard's league and nine years hadn't changed that.

Thankfully, he removed his hand and her mind cleared.

"Whenever you want to talk, I'm here."

Not taking a moment to consider whether or not Richard was the person she wanted to reveal all to or not, she just started talking. "I got laid off six months ago. A small part of me knew it was coming. A year ago the bonuses stopped, I never saw my annual raise. All parties had ceased. I thought things would turn around, then I thought I could find another job. My roommate of three years left three months ago after she got married. Staying in the apartment alone ate into my savings and when my car needed a new transmission it took the last of it. The only money I had coming in was unemployment. Come January I wouldn't have been able to pay my rent. So, I gave them my thirty day notice. I sold the furniture, dirt cheap, to pay off back bills and overdrawn credit cards. Yesterday, I shipped several boxes to my parent's house. Packed up the rest in cases and drove away from my D.C. townhouse on Connecticut Ave--" her voice broke.

Taking hold of her hand Richard held it. Neither of them said anything for a moment.

A small amount of relief washed over her to tell someone what was going on. Over the last year her friends in D.C. had become scarce. No one wanted to be around a sinking ship.

"You know, Lorna," he began, "You're not the first person ever to leave home and attempt to live out their dreams and hit a bump."

She shook her head. "A bump? More like a wall." She stared down at their hands still joined. As much as she was enjoying feeling his strong hand engulfing her own, she pulled away. "Honestly, Richard, I was ashamed, which is the real reason I didn't tell my parents." She felt ashamed and defeated.

As they came around the bend to her parent's house, he pulled the truck off to the side and dimmed the lights.

"What are you doing?" Perplexed, she stared between him and her childhood home. Her heart started to race again as she gazed out the window. It was late. Her parents would be reading by the fire or already in bed. The Christmas lights her dad hung every year lit up the house. The seven foot inflatable Santa Claus awaiting visitors on the porch.

A click echoed in the enclosure as he undid his seatbelt and turned to her. "Lorna."

The southern inflection in his voice was turning her inside out.

"Lorna," he said again.

She looked across the cab at him. His features were concealed by the darkened cab. "Yes."

"Things will work out, you'll see. A lot of people are going through rough times now. I must say I'm glad you decided to come home."

"I had nowhere else to go." Lowering her gaze, she stared at the dark shadows of her hands. "Where else could I have gone?"

"Doesn't matter. You still came home."

Her lips pulled up into a smile even though he wouldn't be able to see it. "Thanks, Richard, please don't say anything."

"I promised I wouldn't tell a soul and I won't."

There was a light brush along her cheek. In the darkness she didn't see him move, and the touch had been so subtle she almost believed she'd imagined it.

The truck lights came back up again and he pulled down the lane to the house.

"I don't know what I'm going to tell my folks."

Stopping the vehicle, he said, "You'll figure it out."

They hopped out of the truck and removed the suitcases from the backseat. Richard carried both cases, while she clutched her purse on the porch.

For the first time that night she could clearly see his face. The heartthrob of her youth had grown up to be a striking man. The boyhood charm had become genuine masculine appeal. A strong jaw and sensual lips dared a woman to lean forward and kiss him.

Richard leaned toward her. Drawn to him, she was unable to resist him even though her mind told her the move wasn't wise. Yet and still, her eyes began to slide closed.

The familiar sound of the doorbell jarred her senses. Momentarily confused, she realized her mistake. Richard hadn't been ready to kiss her at all. He was just reaching for the bell to awaken her parents.

Shuffling could be heard through the door. Then it opened, saving her from looking at Richard and discovering whether or not he'd been privy to her faux pas.

Her father's stout frame filled the door. He'd once been a muscular six foot man, now he stood a little under five eleven and most of his broad chest had become a round stomach, but she loved him just the same. "Hi, Dad."

"Lorna, is that you?" He blinked a few times as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"Merry Christmas," she cheered.

Swinging the door wide, he pulled her into a bear hug and planted a kiss on her forehead.

"Rebecca Jean, come here and see what the elves have dragged home." His round, caramel colored cheeks broke into a big smile.

She held tight to her father, as he walked with her into the house. He smelled like rum raisin bread pudding, one of his famous desserts.

Light flooded the living room, as her mother entered from the back bedroom tying her robe. Her salt and pepper curls held back away from her face with a satin head band, her brown skin shiny with night moisturizer. "Who is it?..." Her mother's words faded away on a gasp. "Oh, my, it's my precious baby girl."

Letting go of her father, Lorna ran towards her mother and hugged her. This was home. Feeling the gentle pressure of her mother's arms around her, made Lorna swallow more than once to keep from crying. Her world had tumbled down around her feet, but until this moment she hadn't felt any peace.

"Precious, why didn't you call? I would've kept dinner warm for you." Time had swept across her mother and aged her. A petite woman was now just as plump as she was pretty.

"This is surely a surprise of the first degree." Her father commented. "Richard, were you in on this?"

"No, sir, I'm just an accessory by default." Richard said.

Lorna had almost forgotten Richard was still there with the excitement of seeing her parents.

She and her mother crossed the room to the two men, still linked arm and arm. "No, ma'am, I don't need anything, but my bed and daddy's breakfast in the morning."

"You got it, baby girl." The smile on her father's face was more than worth the long drive.

"Richard, can I offer you a cup of coffee or some cake? Mr. Morgan made rum raisin." Her mother let her go for a moment to hug Richard and give him a kiss on the cheek.

"Oh, no, ma'am. I'm headed home. I have a full day tomorrow and I'll be needin' my beauty sleep."

He received a clap on his back by her father, "Early to bed and all that jazz."

"Yes, sir." Richard's eye's seized Lorna's from across the room. "Well, now that you're in safe hands, I'll be headin' on. I'll make sure your car gets here."

"What happened to your car?" Her father looked at her, concern clouding his gaze.

"Nothing, Dad. You know it gets a little cantankerous at times." She waved her hand hoping her father would let the conversation drop.

She escorted Richard to the door. "Thanks a lot." Turning the knob she opened the door. "For everything."

For a moment, he didn't say anything, just stared down into her face.

"Anytime, Lorna." Winking at her, he left.

"Samson, get the bags. Lorna, come up with me so we can get fresh sheets on your bed." Her mother stood at the base of the stairs waiting.

"Yes, ma'am." They traveled up to the second floor and headed toward her bedroom.

"Tomorrow, when you wake, we'll see about what's wrong with that car." Her dad set the bags down by the door.

"Don't worry, Dad. It just needed a rest. It will be fine in the morning." She tried to reassure him, even though she wasn't sure about anything that had to do with her life.

"We're your parents. Worrying is what we do best." Her mother chimed in.

Knowing it was useless to argue, Lorna remained silent as she helped her mother strip the bed and add new linens.

"Well, you get a good night sleep, precious. We'll see you in the mornin'." Her mother kissed her.

Lorna met her father halfway across the room and became the recipient of another strong hug.

When they left, she closed the door and put on her nightclothes. She slipped into bed and refused to allow herself one moment to think. Tomorrow was soon enough to face all her fears and secrets that were following her from D.C. Snuggling down into her blankets, her mind complied with her demand, except in one area. Richard.

Nothing she told herself would remove his image from her mind. Exhausted she stopped trying and dreamed.

Chapter Two

Finally, he got into bed. Thirty minutes ago he'd arrived home, took Max, his dog, out for a walk. Now his companion lay curled up by the fireplace in the living room. Richard still found it hard to believe that Lorna Morgan was back in Carlton County. His life hadn't been the same since she'd left their small North Carolina town for the big city. Smiling to himself, he thought about how interesting life in town was about to get. Closing his eyes he gave into sleep.

He saw Evelyn sneak into the woods alone. It was his junior year and most of the teens hung out at the lake for spring break. Breaking away from his friends by the bonfire he pursued his girlfriend at the time. Circling his way around the woods his mind had conjured up a scene of a little woodland action. Locating a decent sized tree, he hid behind it and waited for her to cross his path.

A twig snapped, and a few seconds later a curvaceous silhouette passed by him. Quickly, he grabbed her and pulled the luscious body to him, walking her backwards to the tree. The small gasp she made at his surprise was silenced by his lips. Her lips were stiff at first, as if she wasn't sure if she was going to respond. He didn't allow her to deny him. Nibbling on the sides of her lip until she moaned, then he slipped his tongue into her mouth and tasted her. She sighed.

It wasn't Evelyn. This girl tasted like sugarplums, not spearmint candy. She was an instant addiction. He needed more of her. Taking another step, he pressed her along the oak and aligned his body to her curves. A part of his brain tried to tell him that he should stop, but it was overruled by the pure pleasure of feeling her hands glide into his hair. The kiss deepened, they were both willing participants now.

His hands went on an adventure of their own. One traveled underneath the edge of her shirt, feeling the soft heat of her skin. She squirmed, he would have smiled with the knowledge of discovering her delicious sweet spot, but his lips were still too busy with kissing her. His other hand traveled around her waist and cupped the thick plumpness of her backside. Her ass was perfectly round and filled his hand just the way he liked.

No way in hell was this Evelyn. She was pretty but very petite, to the point of frailness. He always had to restrain himself in fear he'd hurt her. Not this girl. She took the intensity of his passion and gave it back in full measure.

He wanted to know who this delectable girl was, but he didn't want the moment to end. Never before had he been turned inside out as he felt right then. Who was she? Who was she?

Lifting his hand higher under her shirt, he felt the warm supple weight of her breast. The heat of her skin seared him through the silky thin material of her bathing suit top. Groaning, he stroked the distended peak of her nipple. Moaning, she clutched his hand, holding it tighter against her. He responded by grinding his hips into her and allowing her to fully comprehend how she was affecting him.

Another branch snapped somewhere around them, and they froze. Their breathing heavy, intertwined between their bowed heads. She was just as affected which satisfied him.

Before he could fix his lips to find out the identity of his woodsy nymph someone called his name. It was Evelyn's high pitched voice. While he'd turned to see how close the intruder was, his mystery girl had left.

Richard didn't know if it was the sound of his own groan that awakened him or the beaming light of the sun ray through a crack in his blinds. Either way he had a hard-on to deal with. It wasn't his typical morning wood, no this one was generated by erotic thoughts of Lorna. Ones he hadn't had in

years. His last two years of high school he spent palming himself every morning thinking about the girl he couldn't have. Now as a man he was caught in the same state at dawn.

He'd be damned if he was going to go through the motions of jerking himself off each morning just so he could be decent around her. Not allowing his dick the opportunity to raise its thick head and embarrass him. He was a grown ass man, this time he was going to get what he'd wanted years ago. Lorna.

Just as soon as he took care of the current problem at hand. Flinging the covers down, he freed himself from his boxers and wrapped his hand around his pride and joy. Glancing down, he saw his own strong fingers circling it and smiled to himself as images of Lorna's beautiful ginger hand there instead. Thinking about the feeling and sight of Lorna stroking his cock, caused him to squeeze his eyes together.

The pressure was intense, he shook with desire. Not just the present desire to get himself off, but more with the need to have Lorna by his side. In his bed, surrounding his body.

That did it. A few firm glides up and down his dick and he was erupting over his own hand. Heat and shivers of release slid along his spine as the warm sticky substance continued to ooze from the tip of his rod.

Getting up, he crossed the room to the bathroom. Washed his hands first then turned on his shower. He knew the physical relief he felt now was only temporary. As he got under the spray of water his mind began to consider ways he could make Lorna a permanent in his life.

* * *

"Good afternoon, sweetheart," her father smiled up at her as he sat in his lazy-boy in front of the fire completing a crossword puzzle.

"Afternoon?" Stepping off the last step, she glanced out the window and saw the sun high and bright. Most of the snow was gone from the night before. "Wow, I didn't realize I was being a slug-a-bed." Moving to him, she kissed him on the cheek.

"You were probably tired from your trip." Her father patted her shoulder. "Why don't we head in the kitchen and get you something to eat."

She took note of the slowness in which her father rose from his chair. Concern tightened her forehead. "Dad, you alright?"

"Never better. You know I always get a little stiff around the winter. That's why we go visit your Aunt Gertie for Christmas every year in Florida. But, since you have other things to take care of, we're staying here."

"Good thing we did, too, Samson," her mother's light voice joined in when they entered the kitchen. She was sitting at the table with a large puzzle before her. The shapes were so tiny, Lorna guessed it to be another two thousand piece puzzle she was putting together.

Lorna smiled. Her mother always did have ears all over the house. "Mom, shouldn't you have your glasses on?"

"That's right." Her father added his chorus. "Rebecca Jean never listens to me, Honey bear. Nope. So, you sit down as I fix your breakfast and give your mother a fit."

Laughing at her mother as she rolled her eyes, then snatched up her glasses from the other end of the table.

"There, Samson, are you happy now?" She topped it off by sticking out her tongue.

Her father didn't see because his back was to them as he pulled pans and ingredients out of the cabinet.

"It wouldn't take her half as long to finish one as it does." Her father called out over sizzling bacon.

"What's the rush? I'll just start another one. All I got is time on my hands."

Her father grumbled more, but the conversation stopped momentarily. Lorna enjoyed sitting and listening to her parents hassle each other. She had no doubt of their love. They were best friends who'd fallen in love and married. As she took in both of them comfortable in their home, two people who had always appeared ageless to her, she noticed the reality of how much they had aged since the last time she was home.

It was true they went to Florida, but she always thought it was just for the family annual get together. Not due to her father's arthritis. Her mother's sight was going. What was next? She was the only child. Her parents were in their late sixties. Maybe it was time she did think about coming home to visit them more often, if, and when, she ever found another job.

"So, sweetheart, how long will you be home? Can I hope until the New Year?" Her mother grabbed her hand.

"Rebecca Jean, her job is very demanding with the Cosco, Stevenson, Lincoln, Clevand, Bangel and Jones firm she works for in D.C."

Giggling, Lorna corrected her father who frequently messed up the name of the accounting firm she had worked for over six years. "Bangel, Jones, Robertson and Cosco." Then she became a little more serious remembering her mother's question. "I'll definitely be here for Christmas then we'll play the rest by ear. You're not tired of me already, are you?"

She'd have to go into town to use the internet at the library and continue her job searching. She hoped that she'd get a bite before the rest of her things showed up at the house. With the holiday, the packing and shipping company wouldn't be able to get it out before the end of the year.

"No, never. I could see my precious baby girl everyday and never tire of it."

Even if she were jobless and mooching off you and dad? She picked up a puzzle piece and pretended to study the table for its placement, while she thought.

"Alright, Lorna, here's your breakfast." Her father put the plate down at the other end of the table, away from the jigsaw puzzle covering the other half.

Smiling, she got up. She hugged him before she took her seat in front of the mini feast of eggs, bacon, grits and biscuits and gravy. "Wow, Dad, everything looks and smells great as always." It had been a while since she'd eaten more than a carton of yogurt for breakfast.

"You have as much as you want. There's plenty." He sat beside her with a bacon biscuit.

Looking over at the stove she said, "Enough for a small army, Dad."

"Oh, don't mind your dad. You get a good fillin' the rest we'll take to the city for the mission in a little while." Her mother gazed down the six person table at her. "But, while you're here we're going to help you gain a few pounds. You look thinner since we saw you last year."

Digging into her food, Lorna saved herself from responding more than a word or two. If they stayed on this conversation long her parents would know how hard it was to gain weight living off yogurt, salad, and tuna.

The door bell rung.

"That must be Carla Mae ready to take the clothes and things into Winston." Fixing a piece into place, her mother rose and headed toward the door.

"So, where did you leave your car?"

"Off the road by the old pre-school, it was just a little overheated. It should be fine now." Taking a few more bites of food, she became silent. She was hoping her car would be okay and just needed to cool down like always.

"Well, good morning, Greg." Her mother's voice rang into the kitchen.

Lorna accompanied her dad into the living room to meet the unexpected guest.

"Greg. What brings you out here this afternoon?" Her father shook hands with his brother and patted him on the back. "I thought we agreed that tomorrow we'd go get a tree for Margret, is she bugging you?"

"We did." Greg nodded. His dark chocolate features broke into a smile when he saw her. "Well, I'll be, Lorna. It is good to see you. I told my sons I'd bring your car over myself just to see that pretty face."

She grinned and hugged him. "Hi, Uncle Greg. How are Peter and Paul doing?" Her uncle had raised twin boys alone after his wife ran off with a truck driver. It had been the scandal of the year twenty years ago.

"Fine, fine."

"You said you got Lorna's car from the road?" her dad asked.

"Nope." Greg shook his gray capped head. "Early as the birds, Richard Patterson came by the house with her car in tow."

Speechless, Lorna stared at her uncle. Richard had taken her car to the mechanic? "Thanks, Uncle Greg. How much do I owe you for the antifreeze? It ran a little hot last night, but I didn't have time to put some in there."

"You owe me nothing. While I had it I did a check and replaced a few things on it and got you some tires. I don't know how you made it here with those threads you were running on."

Biting the side of her lip, Lorna felt embarrassed that someone else had knowledge of her shame. "I'll pay you--"

Her dad rubbed her on the shoulder silencing her. "That was kind of you, Greg. But, I'll get my checkbook and give you something on it." Her dad turned to head to the bedroom.

"I told you, Samson, I don't need your money. Richard took care of all that too. He said it was his Christmas gift slash welcome home gift to Lorna."

"Ohmy, that was very sweet of him." Brightness lit her mother's gaze as she looked at her.

"Sweet. I'll have to thank him when I see him." Or strangle him is more like it, Lorna thought.

"Well, here are your keys." Uncle Greg dangled them before her, her Hello Kitty charm hanging from it.

She took them from him. With everything going on last night, Lorna hadn't even remembered that she never got her keys back from Richard.

"It's like the parade of cars out there Rebecca." Carla Mae came in like a summer breeze, trailed by her mother's closest friends and charity group: Linda, Sarah, Mandy Sue, and Pricilla.

"Lorna!" They all screamed in unison and converged on her.

Let the fun begin.

* * *

"A quarter pound of sugar plums, please."

Richard came out the back office just in time to see Lorna standing by the candy counter. With her natural curls held back away from her face with a band, it reminded him of old times. Her face was clean of make-up and she looked just as she had in high school with more sex appeal to the luscious curves of her body. Nina must have given her a sample one, because Lorna was taking her precious time at licking the sugar crystals off of the oval-shaped purple treat. Her eyes were bright with enjoyment and her full lips were pulled back to a smile. Those candies were how he'd discovered Lorna was the girl he kissed in the trees that spring break. *Once everyone was gathered around the fire again, she'd pulled an already open package from her purse and finished them off. He'd remained hard the rest of the night until she left with her friend.*

Unable to get her out of his mind, he'd broken it off with his girl friend a week later. Giving the excuse he needed to concentrate on school to get into a good college even though he'd already been accepted to North Carolina State. By the time he returned four years later, Lorna was gone.

Now, he stared at her and wondered how she would've responded if he'd grabbed her by the waist and laid her across the closest table in the dining room and tasted all the goodness of her sugar plum. The desire to spread her legs wide and lick the cream from between her thighs as slowly as she was doing the candy made him suck in air. His jeans were becoming tight and if he didn't keep his self in check, this family restaurant would become an adult's only spot soon.

Migrating around the diners, he moved up beside Lorna. "Well, what do I owe the pleasure of this sweet treat?" Crossing his arms over his chest, he waited.

Taking her purple gummies away from Nina, his employee, Lorna faced him. "Can we talk?" With her head she indicated a back corner.

Turning he saw all the eyes of his patron's observing them, so he nodded and followed her to an empty table away from the other guest.

"Richard, my uncle came by the house this afternoon and told me that you paid for all the repairs on my car." She ceased in licking the candy and bit into it.

"That's true." He got comfortable in the booth bench across from her.

"Why did you do that? I had planned to take care of it. Matter of fact, it would've been just fine this morning." Popping the remainder of the purple chunk into her mouth, she leaned back against the seat.

"Lorna, for one thing, your car didn't start this morning. Second of all, I called your uncle and he said he was free today with no cars in his bay and could take care of it."

Her teeth seized the corner of her bottom lip. "How much do I owe you?" She pulled her purse open and began to rummage inside.

Shaking his head, he stretched across the table and touched her hand, halting her search. "Lorna, you don't owe me anything. It was a favor for a long time friend."

"Look, Richard." She leaned toward him and lowered her voice. "I'm not a charity case. I can pay you."

Lifting his eyebrow he just stared at her. He wondered if she forgot that she'd confessed to him last night that she was on her last leg financially which was the reason she came home. "No, you can't. We'll call this a Christmas gift."

He lost the sight of her pretty brown eyes as she bowed her head and nodded.

"Whoa beautiful, why so silent?" Touching her chin, he lifted her face up and saw her liquid gaze. "Sweetheart, don't cry. If it means that much to you, I'll let you pay me back. Shoot, I'd love your help with my bookke--"

"It's not that." She waved her hand between them, stopping his words.

He watched her take in a shaky breath to calm down. "What is it?"

"All the things that my parents have done for me..." She turned her head, as if taking in the painting of the cow wearing a bonnet. "I've been so selfish over the years. Now here I am groveling again and I can't even afford to get them Christmas gifts."

Now he understood. "I get it. Do you want me to lo--"

Both of her hands came up like stop signs. "No! Please, don't even think it. There's nothing I can do about it days away from Christmas."

Richard had never seen Lorna like this before. She was always so confident in school. Head held high, knowing one day she was going to kick sand on this town as she ran fast away from it towards her dreams in a big city. Now, she was back with her dreams crushed.

"Just having you home for the holidays or longer is more than enough for them, I'm sure."

Nodding, she grabbed a napkin from the table dispenser and wiped her eyes and nose. "You're right." She shrugged. "It just would've been nice to have something for them. A little appreciation."

He watched her lower her gaze to the table, fiddling with the strap of her purse. Everything inside of him yearned to ease her mind and the stress weighing on her shoulder.

"I need to head home. My dad needed some things from the market. I want to get to them before it gets too late."

Reaching his hand out, he grasped hers and halted her movement as she started scooting off the bench. "Tomorrow night is the Carlton County Christmas party, are you coming?"

Lorna's mouth twisted slightly as she sat silent, pondering. "Is it still here at your family restaurant?"

Chuckling, he said, "Where else would they have it?"

Her nose crinkled in the cutest fashion as she smiled. "You're right. I thought maybe they would try the high school gymnasium again."

"Not since the disastrous event during your senior year. Too small to hold all the town folks. Besides I think my ears are still ringing with Principle Jenkins' scream not to boot-scoot because it would scratch up the floors."

This time she laughed outright and he loved hearing the sound. "I remember. Since I'm in Carlton I guess I have to come. My parents would be heartbroken if I didn't show." She groaned. "But I can honestly say I'm not looking forward to the game of twenty questions on the topic of Lorna."

"Well, it is a small town." Still holding her hand, he stroked his thumb across the back of it. He was glad she didn't make a move to pull away. "People don't mean any harm, their just curious as hell."

"How many cats have to die?" she grumbled. Finally, pulling her hand out of his, she rose. "Well, I'll see you tomorrow."

"By the way I do need some help with my bookkeeping," he said.

"After the holidays I'll come by. Do you have QuickBooks installed?"

He frowned. "Quick what? My dad used paper and pencil, if that helps."

The start of a smile twitched at the side of her mouth, but the sadness hadn't gone away. "I'll help."

Getting up as well, he towered over her. She looked so vulnerable, he wanted to pull her in his arms and hold her. Shit, who was he kidding? He wanted to do a hell of a lot more than share and innocent hug with her. More like hold her with both of them buck-naked in a horizontal position and a lot of stroking and grinding going on.

Thankfully, someone called him from the kitchen. Clearing his throat, he waved a good-bye to her and went to take care of the needs of his establishment. One second longer of staring at Lorna and he'd have pulled her to his office. Once there, he would've let her unwrap a big Christmas gift with her name written all over it.

Chapter *Three*

Lorna felt guilty as hell. The night had finally began to wind down. Three hours of grilling questions from everyone in the damn county and three hours of her tap dancing around the truth. She'd been home now for four days and still hadn't opened up to her parents about what was going on with her.

She was being a sacred selfish twit. Regardless of how wonderful it felt to be home and around her family, she knew it was all pretence until she opened up to her mom and dad. Five days until Christmas and she was still holding out, like her news was going to be a happy surprise. She shook her head. No, her news was nothing like, 'Hi, Mom and Dad I'm getting married to the man of my dreams' or 'Mom, Dad, your son in-law and I are pregnant.' Nope, nothing like that. It was more in line with 'Mom, Dad, I dropped out of college and spent all your money on a time share in the Everglades' or 'Hi, Mom and Dad, please answer the collect call, I've been arrested and need you to bail me out.' "Again," she mumbled.

"Beautiful women shouldn't stand around talking to themselves."

The smile that curled up her lips was instant at the sound of Richard's voice. "Good thing I'm just marginally good looking." Still keeping her back to him, her heart fluttered at their word play. It was doing a lot of that lately. She'd find herself doing things around the house, then gazing off in the distance with thoughts of Richard. It seemed as if her crush in high school was rearing its head with a vengeance.

"So, you say. I disagree strongly, Lorna." Richard's breath tickled her ear as he leaned behind her. "Why don't you help me win a bet? I'll give you fifty percent of the winnings."

She could almost feel the heat of his body along her backside, the urge to take a step back to make contact with him overwhelmed her.

Turning, she eyed the striking features of his face, the precious blue of his gaze drawing her in. "Aren't you boys a little too old to be placing bets?"

One broad shoulder lifted and lowered. "Probably, but you know how it is with Doogey. He'd bet on the time it took for a fingernail to grow if he could. Then he has a way of getting everyone else all involved."

Some things in her small town would just never change. "What's the bet?"

The lopsided smile gracing his lips made the single dimple on his left cheek deepen. "Let me just preface this by saying it was Doogey's idea."

Nodding, her understanding that it would be something crazy because of the owner of the bet she sipped her eggnog and waited. Doogey started his name in high school and soon progressed to being known in town for his pranks and bets. Amazingly, he'd turned out to be one of the town's deputies, which wasn't saying much.

Richard peered over his shoulder at his co-conspirators across the room. The four men, a term she thought of loosely, huddled around the same back table she and Richard had occupied yesterday. They laughed and jabbed each other in expectation.

When Richard faced her again, his blue eyes assessed her. Starting from the top of her head and slowly lowering.

His slow gaze was like a caress. Her body began to heat up underneath the short red and white striped sweater dress she wore. It was the only thing in her closet that was Christmassy, at least in color. Now under Richard's perusal it felt as if she were dressed indecently.

"I do believe you're the hottest thing here tonight, Lorna. Like a chocolate dipped candy cane." His eyes met hers and her heart leaped. In high school girls had whispered at sleepovers about Richard 'Dick' Patterson saying such things to them.

Her mouth went dry. Licking her lips, she tried to stay focused. "The bet, Richard," she wasn't going to allow herself for a moment to be flattered by his words. It was hard enough not fantasizing about him just by seeing him, she didn't want to give herself false hopes.

"The guys don't believe that you'll let me kiss you under one of the mistletoe hanging around the room."

Did he say kiss? Swallowing to remoisten her mouth which instantly went dry, she asked, "I'm sorry what did you say?"

Crossing his arms over what she could assume was a well muscled chest, he gave her a direct look as a smile played at the corners of his mouth. "They said you wouldn't let me kiss you under the mistletoe."

"That sounds like a silly bet. Matter of fact a little lame for Doogey. It's Christmas, people give out meaningless kisses all the time." She attempted to make light of the situation. Even though there was nothing light about the pounding of her heart. Her mind was racing with the thought of what it would feel like to have Richard's lips on hers, again. This time he would know it was her he kissed, instead of an easy no name woman in a darkened forest. She'd never forgotten that experience in her sophomore year. It had been a mistake, an earth shattering mistake. She knew if he'd known it was her he would've been disgusted. Guys weren't banging down her door to go out with her, then. So, she'd made it a point to stay away from him.

"Possibly," his single word broke into her thoughts.

She frowned at him. If this was the bet, it had to be part of a joke. "So what's the price?" Lifting the glass, she took another drink hoping the brandy laced eggnog would calm her nerves.

Leaning forward, Richard whispered, "Five hundred dollars."

The alcohol went down the wrong pipe, causing her to begin coughing violently.

Richard moved quickly taking the glass from her, fiercely patting her on the back.

Seeing all of the twenty people remaining at the Christmas gathering staring at her, she held up her hand to halt the firm strikes letting him know she was okay.

Doogey and his chums were laughing even harder. She knew they couldn't hear them so she wondered what they thought was so funny.

Clearing her throat a few times before she spoke, her voice raspy, "Did you say five hundred?"

His nod confirmed.

"That's a lot of money for my lips." She cleared her windpipe one more time. "If I'd known they were worth so much, I'd put them on the Internet. I'd make a killing on eBay. Lord, knows I need the cash," she mumbled. She wanted to get her parents something for Christmas and with her depleting funds it wasn't a possibility.

He laughed.

She enjoyed hearing the strong rumbling. "If your game I'm willing to make two-fifty." Glancing around the room for one of the various mistletoes dangling from the ceiling to get the "deed" done, she didn't see Richard step to her.

"I don't think you fully understand the extent of the bet rules." He slipped one large hand around her waist.

Fireflies danced up and down her spine causing waves of flames to rocket her body. "Believe it or not, Richard, I understand the workings of a kiss. I pucker, you pucker, and *voilà*."

Moving closer, the heat of his body enclosed her own as he spoke into her ear as he moved her body to the overhead music. His lips brushed the shell. "The wager is on the lips below your navel."

"Below my nav--" The fog of confusion lifted and took her ability to speak with it. Everything became clear. *Here was the catch.* She should have known there was more to it with Doogey involved.

Staring passed Richard's shoulder, she could see the four men now to the point of holding their side. Doogey was practically lying across the table as he stared their way. Once again she was the town joke. The urge to throw eggnog in the culprit's face made her grit her teeth. In school the guys had picked with her and called her *boogie*. Spreading rumors that she thought she was too good to date any of them.

But that wasn't the truth, it was just that the only guy she'd wanted to ask her out never did. Shifting her gaze she stared at Richard. The one she wanted was now before her asking to kiss her sex for five hundred dollars.

"What do Doogey and the boys want me to do? Walk under the mistletoe in the middle of the room and raise the hem of my dress while you drop to your knees before me in front of everyone?" Her town was small. Only seven hundred people and gossip traveled fast. Her baring all of her glory to the people in the room was definitely gossip fodder.

"They didn't say, but I have a plan how we could do it and no one would be the wiser."

Was he serious? Maybe he took her for some behind the bleachers floozy. Deanna Carmichael was still in the room and she would have done it and more without blinking. The girl was on her fourth husband as of two weeks ago and fifth child three months ago. No one knew who the father of the fifth child was, but Lorna had already heard the town suspected the principal at the high school. Someone had seen Deanna and Mr. Ford arguing behind the Piggly Wiggly. His wife had died a year ago.

With all the older people gone home for the night, Deanna wouldn't have hesitated.

"As flattering and insulting as this offer is...I'm not the girl for the job. Go ask Deanna."

Tilting her head up, Lorna started to walk away.

Curling his arm all the way around her waist again, Richard halted her steps and pulled her body flushed against his. Sweeping her around the dance floor as *Rockin Around the Christmas Tree* played, he met her gaze.

"Lorna, I wouldn't allow anyone to insult you."

Was there something in his voice, more behind his words? No, she was fooling herself. Wanting there to be more.

"The bet is already insulting on its own."

"Hear me out, Lorna." His hand squeezed hers. "Two hundred and fifty dollars. You can't afford to walk away from that."

"That was a low blow, *Dick*."

He growled at the name. "Listen. You see that mistletoe hanging over the bar?" he twirled her.

Glancing around, she saw the bushel.

Pulling her back to him, he went on, "We go back there and I'll pretend to be picking up something or fixing the tap, who knows I'll figure it out--"

"While I what? Sit on the bar with my legs spread." She wanted him to hear every bit of sarcasm in her voice.

The lift of his eyebrow told her he did and his fingers pressing her back seemed to be saying something else. What she didn't know.

"No, you just stand behind the bar. When I kneel down, everybody else will think I'm doing something respectable. But, we need to convince Doogey, Skip, Paul, and Rocky that I'm doing my part to win the bet."

Her feet followed the steps he made around the floor. "What's going to make them think any different? They won't be able to see what you're doing."

"But, your Oscar winning performance will be the selling point."

She returned the single eyebrow lift.

"You were in drama for a year in high school. All I need is for you to put a pleased, shocked look on your face."

The other eyebrow joined the first one she had raised.

"You know. Part those full lips of yours, open those hazel eyes wide then look down at your feet as if my head is between your legs." The low sexy timber of his voice was doing a number on her.

Lorna could feel the slight tremor in her legs and the wetness saturating her panties. She wanted to take a deep breath, but her chest felt constricted. Richard's words were turning her inside out. She couldn't deny that part of her desired the real act, not the fake one they were attempting to pull off. The thought of Richard truly placing his lips against the folds of her sex made her clit throb. She was aching between her thighs as if something was really going to happen between them tonight. It wasn't, so her body needed to calm the hell down and deal with it.

"What do you say, Lorna? Do this and we both walk out of here with fatter pockets."

Glancing one more time at the men and seeing them shaking their heads with so much confidence that she wouldn't do it irked her. "When do you want to start?"

Richard's broad smile made her heart flutter. He looked so pleased at her agreement she couldn't help but return the expression. It was them against four cocky bastards who needed to grow up and be taken down a peg or two.

"Lorna, would you like something to drink?" He spoke loud as if to make sure she heard him over the music. *Jingle Bell Rock* was now playing.

The play was beginning and the actors were taking the stage.

"Yes, how about," she stared at the bar and thought quickly, "a pina colada?" She spoke a little louder. "I'm a little tired of eggnog."

Winking at her, he stopped the dance. Taking her hand, he escorted her behind the bar.

He pulled her right under the mistletoe before letting her hand go.

"I'll be right back." He said, then jogged to the back of the store room. Returning quickly, he carried a can of pineapples, coconut milk, and a jar of cherries. He set it all on the counter.

Nerves were beginning to set in. Lorna nibbled on the bottom of her lip. She didn't know what else to do in order to pull off the hoax. The urge to turn around and see if the guys watched them was strong, but she didn't want to give herself away.

The confident look on Richard's face kept her calm.

"Now, I have everything, but the blender." There was a lopsided grin on his mouth.

Scrunching her forehead she stared at him.

His gaze lowered. She followed him and sure enough there was a blender beside her foot on the bottom shelf. *Perfect*. Understanding, she gave him a co-conspirators' smile.

"Would you like me to get it for you?"

"No," he said. "I got it. You just stand right there." Like fine cognac his words were setting her insides ablaze.

Taking the few steps to her, he stood in front of her for a moment. Neither of them moving. Then with precise slowness, he lowered his frame to the floor at her feet. Lorna was captured by the blue eyes staring up at her. His gaze left her face and travel to her breast and beyond. When he stopped, she realized the convenience of his position. The fact that she wore heels placed him at eye level with the apex of her thighs. That vision alone was causing the aching inside to intensify.

His eyes closed.

Was he counting? She wondered. Was there a time limit expected?

The light touch on her ankle was unexpected, she jumped. Opening his eyes, he looked at her. His hand continued to slide up her stocking covered legs. When he got to the back of her knees he paused making small circles.

Her eyes slid shut this time. She hadn't realized the back of her knees were so sensitive. That the spot was so erotic when touched. Her nipples tightened in response.

Richard's hand continued their journey upward. He squeezed her thighs right below the hem of her dress.

Passionate ribbons of excitement danced through her veins, the room around her went dark. She took a step outward, unable to control her response. Right at that moment, she wanted nothing else but for Richard to raise the hem of her dress and kiss her, a full-mouthed kiss and to taste her essence.

As if he understood her need, his dangerous hands slipped to the center of her thighs and under her dress...just inches away from her pulsing pussy.

Please, she moaned in her head, too overwhelmed to allow words to pass her lips.

The pressure of his forehead leaning against her belly caused her to grip the edge of the bar. His thumbs brushed high against her thighs. Any moment she expected to feel him caress the drenched seat of her panties. Her air became tramped in her lungs, her body was tensed with expectation. She tilted her hips toward him, an invitation.

"So, Richard, what'cha makin?" Doogey's voice broke in shattering the bubble of ecstasy she entrapped herself inside.

Everything happened too quickly, Richard moved away and rose with blender in hand. "Lorna wants a pina colada." Reaching over her, he grabbed a bottle of rum from the display under the mirror.

Did his words sound heavy and gravelly to anyone else's ears besides hers?

She exhaled and blinked a few times. Seeing Doogey's cocky knowing expression reflecting back at her in the mirror removed the intimate haze.

Turning she looked at Richard, who chatted with the people now cluttering the bar.

"You okay, Lorna. You look flushed," Tasha her best friend in high school asked. Tasha Larson became Tasha Sanders. She and her husband had twin girls.

Forcing a smile on her face, Lorna said, "I'm fine. Just still trying to adjust to the mountain air, again."

"Guess that's what happens when you leave for so long." Doogey chimed in.

"Can it, Doogey." Richard eyed his friend over the top of the churning blender.

Doogey didn't say anything else, just stared at Richard, curiosity filled gaze.

Lorna looked away from Doogey. The last thing that she wanted was anyone being curious about her and especially not her and Richard.

The drink complete, Richard filled glasses for Lorna and the other ladies at the bar.

When he moved toward her and handed her the glass his eyes travelled along her body. As they returned to hers, their gaze locked.

Could he smell how aroused I was when he kneeled before me? The question echoed in her mind.

She didn't realize how shaky she was until her hands brushed Richard's taking the drink from him. Almost spilling it, she was grateful when he grabbed it, steadying it in her hand.

Placing a small smile on her mouth, she said, "Thanks. I guess I'm more tired than I thought." She knew it was a lie. Another one of many. It was the experience with Richard she couldn't stop thinking about. Those thought were making her feel unsettled.

Lifting her drink she took a sip. The sweet, cool treat was helping to fortify her senses. Bring her body temperature down a level. She took another healthy sip hoping not to get brain-freeze and tasted the subtle bit of the alcohol.

"Wow, good job, Richard. It could use a little more rum." Deanna called out.

"Thanks, Deanna," Richard called out barely sparing the busty redhead a glance.

She was just thinking that it was past time for her to leave when Richard stepped to her. He seemed to disregard the fact they were surrounded by people.

Pressing his lips to her ear, he whispered, "Why don't you make your excuses and get out of here? I'll meet you in the back in about fifteen minutes with your money."

"Are you sure? I doubt if they'll have it all now," she said, her voice in the same tone.

"Let me worry about that." He stepped away from her.

She nodded. Placing her drink on the counter, she walked around the bar to Tasha. It was time for her to start mending some bridges. "Tasha, if you're not too busy with getting things ready for your kids for Christmas. How about you come by for lunch tomorrow?"

A tall, thin, dark skinned girl with almond shaped, hazel eyes stared at her in shock. "Seriously?"

"Yeah," Lorna held her breath. She'd been distant over the years and Tasha had every right to tell her to fuck off.

"I'd like that. I'll bring my famous chicken salad if you provide the drinks and ask your dad to make pound cake."

"Hey, what makes you think I haven't learned to cook in nine years?"

"I heard your mother at the shelter telling my mom how you burnt some bread in the broiler trying to make a grilled cheese sandwich."

Small town USA. Holding up her hands in surrender, Lorna said, "You got me." Hugging her friend, she said, "I'll see you tomorrow. Bring the kids if you need to."

"Are you kidding me? That's what I have a husband for."

"That right." Rodney came up behind his wife and hugged her. Rodney was one of six mailmen in the town.

Lorna watched her friend turn in her husband's arms. She was glad to see Tasha happy.

Waving at a few other people, Lorna grabbed her coat from the hooks at the front door, she put it on and left the restaurant. She forced her car around the corner and allowed it to idle and warm up. Good thing she had to wait for Richard, her car didn't get very far cold.

Burrowing deep in her coat, she waited, trying not to replay the heated moment between her and Richard. She'd process that later when she was alone and in her room. She was thankful when the interior of the car began to warm.

There was a tapping at the window.

Wiping the fog away from the glass with her glove she saw her fantasy man and got out.

"Here's your part of the bet." He held out a wad of bills in front of her.

"Wow, I guess when you're broke, you never imagine people are walking around with so much money on them." Taking the cash she slipped it into her coat pocket.

He shrugged. "It's Christmas."

"Yeah, it is." She didn't know what else to say. Richard stood a foot away from her and his nearness once again was muddling her mind.

"About what happened," he began. "I hope I didn't embarrass you too mu--"

"Don't worry about it. It was just a bet, a game."

Closing the gap between them, he pulled her into his arms. Before she could process what was happening his lips were pressed against hers.

It was nothing like the kiss they had shared in high school. No fumbling in the dark by inexperienced teenagers. The strength and confidence in this kiss proved to Lorna that she was dealing with a man.

One of his hands held the back of her head, while the other palmed her ass. Holding on to his shoulders she opened her mouth and gave him entrance, needing to feel him inside of her.

His tongue slid over hers and tickled the roof of her mouth. She moaned.

The kiss deepened. Plunging in and out of her mouth, as if he were fucking her lips with his thick tongue, making her thighs quiver. Capturing it she suckled him, imagining it was his dick in her mouth. All of a sudden she wanted to taste every inch of his skin. Her desire for Richard was like no other.

Grinding his hard length against her sex, her clit throbbed. She was trembling so bad, there wasn't a doubt in her mind if this moment continued she could come right where she stood.

Pulling back he nibbled at the side of her mouth and licked her bottom lip.

The whisper of his words fluttered across her moist lips, "Not a game." Squeezing her ass one final time he stepped away from her.

Her gaze met his. The blue of his eyes appeared dark like sapphire in the lamp light, shining from the back of the building.

She was speechless from both his words and the kiss.

Not waiting for a response, he walked to the back door and went inside.

Astounded she got into her car and pulled away.

As a jobless woman with very few options before her, was she ready to discover if there was something between her and Richard after all these years?

Yes, her body said. *Hell no*, her mind screamed.

Chapter *Four*

Richard leaned against the back door, hearing the sound of Lorna's car pulling away and the noise of the people in the front room.

He'd mislead Lorna. There had been a bet, but it was only for two hundred and fifty dollars and it was for any woman in the room. At first he'd planned to tell Doogey and their friends to kiss off. But, he'd eye'd Lorna across the room. He knew she needed money. And he had a need for her.

Closing his eyes and taking a deep breath he attempted to calm his body. He couldn't resist kissing Lorna anymore than he could stop the erection in his pants from reaching dramatic proportions. Hell, it was already passed that point and into painful length and size.

Shit, that was what being around Lorna did to him all the time. Usually, he didn't have to worry about a business full of people. Normally, he was at home alone where he could relieve himself. He needed a moment alone with Lorna to show her what he wanted from her.

"You really do have it bad."

Those words were what he was feeling, but that wasn't him saying it. Richard lifted his head from the door and peered across the room and spotted Tasha walking into the door leading from the front room. "Have what?" He moved away from the door.

Meeting him in the center of the kitchen, a confident smile pulled at her lips. "A thing for Lorna."

Not confirming or deny her words, Richard assessed Tasha. Tasha wasn't normally one of the gossip-seekers in town, but he wasn't sure how much he should admit. too. Lorna was really sensitive where their old school friends were concerned.

He shrugged and began to walk passed her toward the dining hall where the other people were.

"I could help you," she called after him.

Stopping, he turned and eyed her. "How?"

"I've known Lorna just as long as you have. The only difference is while you and the popular crowd were ignoring her or making fun of her, I was her best friend."

Refusing to comment about the past mistake of his friends, he said, "And?"

Closing the distance between them, Tasha smiled again, "Richard, I can see how much you care about Lorna. You need someone in your corner pleading your case."

His mind flashed back to the kiss outside. "I think I'm pleading my own case just fine."

"Maybe," she giggled. "If what was going on at the bar was any example....," waving her hand away, she continued, "Lorna can be a little blind when it comes to matters of the heart."

"What's in it for you?" He crossed her arms over his chest.

"Nothing, just a friend who will hopefully stay in town." The smile slid from her face and a small shadow of sadness clouded her features.

Believing her motives, he nodded. "Thanks, Tasha."

Without another comment, they joined the few people remaining in the restaurant.

* * *

"So, we've talked about my spoiled darlings. Your parents. My parents. My brother Simmons and his no good cheating wife." Tasha continued to count across one hand. "Oh, discussed Ms. Huntley who is going to design a blanket for your mother and Mr. Huntley who's fashioning a cane for your father." She paused, "There's only two things we haven't talked about."

Lorna stood up and put their chicken salad plates in the sink. Stepping to the cabinet she reached inside for two saucers, "More coffee?" She turned and smiled at her friend.

Raising an eyebrow, Tasha nodded. "Yes, thank you."

Stalling, that's exactly what Lorna was doing. For the past hour and a half, she'd been dancing around the only two conversations she didn't want to talk about, work and Richard.

Moving back to the table, she sliced the pound cake, still warm from the oven. Her father had whipped it up this morning before he headed out.

"How long are you staying?" Tasha's mind had always been like a steel trap. Once that girl latched on to something it took the Jaws of Life to pry her off it.

Barely settling into her chair, Lorna assessed Tasha. This was a girl who knew all of her secrets from school. *Could she still trust her? Or had time changed the girl she once knew.*

Tasha forked through her cake and sipped at her coffee, waiting.

Lorna knew the answer. Tasha and her parents had been her champions when she talked about moving to Washington to live and work. Once in D.C., she had been the one too busy to call or write, not Tasha. Deciding not to ponder questions of Tasha's sincerity, Lorna began talking.

When it was over, Tasha did what she always did when Lorna had an emotional burst, hugged her.

"Well, I'm sure your parents are happy to have you here either way." Tasha leaned back.

Taking a big bite of her cake, Lorna mumbled. "I haven't told them."

"Why not?"

"I don't want them to be ashamed of me."

"Lorna?" Doubt filled Tasha's voice.

She shrugged. "Okay. They won't," she confessed. "Maybe I'm the one that's ashamed of my own shortcomings. My parents are getting old and I should be in the position to take care of them. Not the other way around."

"Things always have a way of working out." Tasha patted her knee. "Whatever the cause, I'm glad you're home."

"So am I." Lorna was amazed to know that her words were true. There was something comfortable and familiar about her small town. Things she'd always tried to get away from.

"Now, we're at the elephant." Tasha served herself another slice of pound cake.

There was only one conversation they hadn't talked about. "Do I think that Ms. Macready will say yes this Christmas to Mr. Deerjohn? It's been forty years."

"There's that. Or we can talk about Richard and you."

"There isn't a Richard and me." Lorna drank some coffee.

"That's not how it appeared the other night at the town holiday party."

Lorna slowly sipped from her coffee and wondered if Tasha had seen more behind the bar than she knew or perhaps had seen the kiss.

"Before you try and deny it. Remember who you're talking to." Tasha warned. "I know better than anyone about your feelings for Richard, even before he kissed you during spring break. You talked about it for a month. I kept waiting for the moment you'd pass out in the hall if he smiled at you."

Damn, she was caught. "Thank goodness he didn't know it was me." Setting her cup down, she confessed, "Fine. My feelings for Richard are still there. But, that's it. We haven't talked about anything else. Maybe once I figure out the rest of my life I'll think about it."

"Girl, you can't make love wait...again."

"Look, Tasha, I don't even know if he's seeing someone."

"That's easy. He's not. In February he broke up with his last girl friend, Mindy Cooper, who up and married someone from Winston-Salem this summer and moved away. She's due in January."

Lorna laughed at her friend's report.

"Small town remember."

"Yeah. Well, I'm not committing myself to anything. I'm not going to rush things. If he brings it up, then we'll see."

“Good. Well, as lovely as this has been, I need to get to the store to pick up the supply for holiday crafts tomorrow.”

“You and your parents still do crafts for Christmas Eve?”

“Every year. With the girls it’s an adventure.”

Tasha grabbed her purse and the now empty salad dish and headed to the door.

“How about lunch for the New Year?” she asked.

“Great. I’ll host this time.” Tasha agreed.

“Good then I’ll--”

“The hell you will cook.”

Lorna laughed. “I was going to say bring sweet tea and a fruit tray.”

Smiling Tasha said, “Perfect. It is good to have you home.”

She hugged Tasha, then watched her pull away.

* * *

“Good night, Mr. Huntley.” Lorna stepped off the porch of the Huntley’s green and white L-shaped rancher and pulled her bomber jacket tighter around her neck. The temperature had dropped in the thirty minutes she’d visited with the older couple and collected her parent’s gifts.

“Be careful on your way home the snow has started.”

Lorna noticed as her boots made prints in the light covering on the ground as she headed to her car. “I will.”

Getting into her car she started it up and backed out the drive way. It was just beginning to get dark when she pulled up, now it was pitch black. The last thing she wanted was to end up in a ditch. Once she reached the rode she honked her horn as she drove off.

The snow was coming down steady and sticking. Mr. Julian most likely was sitting in his front yard with his snowplow already warming, waiting for enough to accumulate so he could clear the roads. Even with them in the mountains it very rarely snowed at all, then not enough to plow. She remembered when he bought it her senior year and everyone laughed.

“Well, you got the last laugh, Mr. Julian.”

The Huntley’s lived at the very outskirts of the county and with the current weather conditions it seemed even further. The weatherman had predicted snow but when she headed out she hadn’t conceived that it would be this bad.

Thirty minutes later she was still trudging along miles from home. She knew she’d have to pull over soon at a neighbor’s house until Mr. Julian got the roads clear. Her parents would be worried and she would need to use a house phone. Cell phones rarely worked in her county.

At least she didn’t have to worry about her car conking out on her, thanks to her uncle and Richard. Just the thought of him caused heat to infuse her body. Her mind returned to the conversation she had with Tasha. Regardless of her feelings toward Richard, there were a lot of unanswered questions. Yes, he had kissed her, but did he want a relationship? Was he just curious? She wanted him. There was no doubt about that, but did she want to put her heart on the line where he was concerned, again?

Chapter *Five*

Richard heard the knock at the door. Setting his mug down on the counter he turned off the eye before heading to the living room. Max stood up from his place by the stove.

"Well, Max, looks like we've got company."

Max gave a soft bark.

"Maybe it's some beautiful snow bunny," he rubbed his dog's head.

Opening the door, he saw who stood there and said, "Merry Christmas to me."

Lorna smiled and his heart beat firm in his chest. He loved the light sparkling in her brown eyes and the curl of her full lips. Lorna was beautiful no matter how he looked at her.

"The snow is clogging the roads. This was the first house I came upon."

"Thank God for snow." He and Max stepped back so she could come in.

This time she giggled. "Do you mind if I stay here until Mr. Julian comes through?"

"Be my guest, please." He helped her out of her jacket. "I was just about to have some cocoa, would you like some?"

"Is it your mom's recipe from the restaurant?"

"I don't know how to make it any other way."

"I have perfected the packet." She still stood by the door and fidgeted with her hands. He wondered if she was nervous around him. Maybe that kiss had set her off balance as it did him.

Max used that moment to bump against her thigh.

"Wow, Max you have really gotten big." Kneeling down in front of the golden retriever she stroked him behind the ears. "You're all grown up now, boy."

He watched Max's eyes close as if he was in paradise. His dog had a heart for Lorna since he was a puppy. He used to take Max to the lake in high school and his dog would find her out of the masses every time.

"Why don't you have a seat on the couch and Max will keep you company while I get the drinks."

"Do you mind if I use your phone? So, I can call my parents?"

"Sure. Your parents are probably worried, they should know your safe from the storm."

Leading the way deeper into his front room, Richard showed her to the chair by the phone.

While she called her parents, Max laid his chin on her lap as she idly stroked his head.

Richard went into the kitchen for the drinks. He'd only returned an hour ago from the restaurant. They only opened for breakfast and lunch on Christmas Eve and closed on Christmas. If he'd delayed in town he would have been stuck and missed this time with Lorna. That he would have regretted.

The fact that he had Lorna in his house alone was making his heart and mind race. He'd dreamed about this moment so often he wanted to pinch himself to ensure it was real.

Placing the mugs on a serving tray, he topped them with whipped cream and set a saucer with four molasses cookies beside them. He went into his pantry and collected the last item and put it on the tray under a pile of napkins.

"The house is beautiful. My dad told me about you and your father building it a few years ago." She commented when he entered the living room.

She was standing before the fire place staring at the pictures of his family on the mantel.

"Thanks. I didn't think it would ever be done. I'm glad you like it. I'm pretty proud of the finished product." He set the tray down and waited for her to join him.

Crossing the room, she sat down hesitantly on the couch and picked up a mug. He settled beside her, leaving about a foot of space between them. It was more than he wanted to leave, but he noticed her anxiousness.

"I'll give you a tour later."

"I'd like that." She cupped her hand around her mug and sipped.

They drank in companionable silence and gazed into the fire. As usual, Max opted for sleep in front of the fireplace over visiting with company.

Shifting his body, Richard turned toward Lorna. "About the other night..."

"Glad you brought that up. I should have thanked you for helping me get gifts to my parents." Continuing to babble, she said, "If I'd known this was your house, I would've brought the presents in so you could see them. The Huntley's did a great job."

"Lorna."

She stopped talking and stared at him. He wasn't sure what got her attention, whether it was hearing her name or his hand on her thigh.

Her eyes met his briefly before they lowered to his hand.

He noticed the rise and fall of her breast. "Lorna, I wasn't talking about the money, but everything else."

She captured him with those brown eyes again. "There's nothing to talk about. I think we both got a little carried away in the moment. No big deal."

He lifted the hand on her lap and cupped her face admiring the light and dark contrast of their skin. "You're wrong. I didn't get carried away in a moment. I'm not seventeen anymore."

She stared at him, appearing unsure of his words. "Seventeen?"

"The first time I kissed you."

"How'd you discover it was me?" Her gaze searched his.

Leaning over, he set his cup down and plucked the napkin off the tray and lifted the small package that was hiding underneath.

"Sugarplums." A smile stretched her thick lips. "Those are my fav--"

"Favorite. I know." Opening the cellophane he pulled out one of the purple sugary treats.

She placed her drink on the tray. "When I got home I was happy to see your families' restaurant still made them."

"All year around. I made sure of that."

"For me?" Her words were soft almost shy.

"Yes. We had something between us since that day in the forest, Lorna, and I've wanted nothing else but to explore that since then."

"Richard."

Using his free hand, he guided the sweet treat across her lips.

They parted and her tongue sneaked out and caught the crystal trail causing him to groan. He returned the other way and she did it again.

"Let me kiss you, Lorna."

"Yes," she whispered, leaning towards him.

"Understand this, my sugarplum fairy. I won't stop until I've kissed you everywhere, tasted every inch of your delicious body. Are you prepared for that?"

"Yes."

Pressing the oval shaped candy to her lips, he requested, "Lick it."

Without question, her tongue came out and began to swirl around the tip. Around and around it went until the top half of the candy was shiny and wet, and he was close to coming in his pants. He couldn't help imagine how her tongue would look circling the tip of his cock.

Unable to take one more delicious moment without tasting her, he tossed the candy plum on the napkin and kissed her. She was a blended delicacy, sugar coated Lorna. Capturing her tongue he

pulled it into his mouth. He didn't know how long the kiss went on and he didn't care. The only thing he concentrated on was pleasuring her.

When she sighed, he moved from her succulent mouth and dragged his tongue along the side of her neck. They warred with each other's clothes. He was excited to know that she was just as turned on as he was. Thankful he wasn't going to be brought to his knees begging her.

As their tops landed on the floor, he said, "Your breasts are beautiful. My imagination didn't do them justice." He palmed the perky twins in his hands, coated with ginger and topped with plump raisins.

"You dreamed of what my breast would look like?"

"Sugarplum, there isn't an inch of your body I haven't fantasized about or a position I haven't thought of us in." He flicked his thumbs over her nipples.

She quivered. "Really?" Her eyes lowered to his hands. "Which position was your favorite?"

"Remove your pants and I'll show you."

Her gaze seized his as she stood up from the couch. First one boot came off, then the other. She slowly began to unfasten her jeans.

Richard stared into her eyes before lowering to the movement of her hands. The zipper slid down, revealing the slight curve of her abdomen to his sight, he loved her body. She pushed her pants and bikini briefs down, and then stepped out of them.

"You're gorgeous, Lorna." Rising he moved toward her and cupped her breast again, then lowered them down her sides, brushed the back of his hand across the small triangle of brown hair covering her sex. He continued to her firm thighs and back up. "Breathtaking and beautiful."

He kissed her again. Passionately taking control of her mouth the way he planned to do to her sex. Both of them were breathing hard when they parted.

Stepping to the mantle he removed something from the top.

Escorting Lorna back to the couch he instructed her to sit as he dropped to his knees before her, placing the small holiday plant on her abdomen.

"Mistletoe?"

"I do believe we didn't quite finish our bet. I'd hate for someone to call the kiss into question."

He took note of the passion flaring in her eyes as she clearly understood his intentions. Grabbing her knees, he separated her thighs, wide. Sliding his hands up her legs he delighted in the sight of her plump pussy lips glistening with her juices. Like a flower in the spring time she was in full bloom, her petals open to him with her stiff stem displayed and filled with nectar awaiting him.

Bowing his head, he inhaled the mouth watering scent, Lorna. Nothing was equal. The other night at the restaurant, he'd caught a slight hint of her scent kneeling before her, but it was nothing compared to this.

Without any further hesitation he tasted her. He took a leisure exploration of her sex with his tongue from ass to clit. Slipping through her cream, he made love to her with his mouth. Circling and tapping the stiff nub, he created a rhythm.

She thrust her hips upward and fisted his hair. He didn't slack in his determination to bring the beautiful woman to ecstasy. He stroked her slit, suckled her clit, and drove his tongue deep into her cunt loving the feel of her walls squeezing around him.

Licking her plump lips, he returned to the seat of her desire taking it into his mouth as his slid one then two fingers inside her. She bucked against his face and her legs trembled as she moaned.

Sensing how close she was to coming, Richard continued his oral assault showing her no mercy. Slipping his fingers from her body, he fondled her, coating her ass with her wetness.

She stilled for a moment. He continued licking up and down her labia and caressing the forbidden hole, lubricating her entrance with her own juices.

"Richard." she whispered, breathless and curious.

Pushing passed the opening with a single digit, he stroked her.

"What are you..." her words faded away and her hips reared up from the couch.

Sucking and tasting her pussy, he finger-fucked her ass as she came hard and fast into his mouth. Elated he consumed her essence until her body settled to an occasional quiver.

Placing calming kisses up her stomach, he took each pouty nipple into his mouth before continuing up her body. A light kiss to her chin he looked at her.

"Are you okay, sugarplum?"

* * *

Okay? She'd never be okay or the same again. "I think we made good on the bet, now."

His chuckle was a heavy rumble against her stomach. "Good then that means the rest of this is just for us." He kissed her and she tasted her own juices.

Lifting her, he moved her body along the length of the couch and settled down on top of her. Fidgeting between them he pushed his pants over his hips.

"What about Max?"

"As you noticed, he's too obedient to move. Besides, once he's sleeping before the fire he's dead to the world." Lying between her thighs he rubbed the tip of his penis against her sex, then placed it at her opening.

Holding his broad shoulders, she asked, "Don't you think we need a condom?"

His cerulean blues stared at her, "Lorna, I've never had sex with anyone unprotected since I started at fifteen. I've imagined for years what it would feel like being inside of you. Now that the moment is finally here, I'll be damn if there'll be anything between us. I'm clean, are you?"

"Clean. One serious relationship in college. Some dates in D.C. that amounted into nothing," she confirmed.

Pressing forward, the broad head of his cock entered her. The air caught in her throat. For a moment her mind became jumbled. All she wanted to do was to call out and ask Richard to fuck her. When he halted his movement with just his tip in, she took a breath. "What about birth control?"

He was silent, then said, "Are you on any?"

She shook her head.

Brushing her hair off her forehead, he stared at her. "If you got pregnant I'd take care of you." He started kissing her again, as he pressed in further.

Wrapping her legs around his hips, she thrust herself forward and forced him deeper inside of her.

"Lorna, I've wanted you for so long, I can't hold back. I promise the next time will be slower."

Burying her hands in his hair, she said, "Don't hold back."

"Music to my ears." He plunged inside, forcing her walls to except him.

Her back arched off the cushions and she seized her bottom lip to muffle her scream at the slight pain caused by his depth.

"You feel like heaven." He continued to move. "Tight fucking paradise."

"Harder," she called out.

With a groan, he began to slam into her. Lorna loved every forceful thrust. She felt whole and one with Richard in a way no other man had touched her soul.

Burying his face in her neck, his body began to quake. Slipping his hand between them, he played her clit, an instrument of pleasure.

Heat coiled in her stomach, her body began to shake. Richard sealed his mouth to hers as they both erupted into ecstasy's embrace.

She enjoyed lying in his arms until her heart resumed a steady beat.

"Are you okay, sweetie?" he whispered.

"I'm fine." Her emotions were toppling all over the place inside of her. She already had strong feelings for him before tonight, now they tripled.

"How about we move this to a more comfortable setting?" Rising, he removed his pants and pulled her into his arms.

She caught a glimpse of his body, muscles sinew and bulging with strength. There wasn't an area on his body she missed, especially the thick muscle hanging between his legs. Long and wide, it gave her chills just recalling the full length pumping inside of her.

"Do you like what you see, baby?" The seductive timber in his voice made heat curl between her legs.

"I like it all very much." She leaned toward his firm lips and kissed him.

The kiss blossomed into touching and stroking, the heat level between them capsized into erotic fusion.

One second she was being scoped off her feet and the next second, cool sheets were caressing her skin in his bed. They didn't stop kissing or touching until her legs were over Richard's shoulders and he was making love to her again.

She didn't know how she'd ever made it through her life without Richard in it, inside of her. Soon her mind went blank as her world spiraled out of control and she came, joined by the man who had stolen her heart.

* * *

Richard was having the best dream of his life. He fantasized he'd made love to Lorna all night long, the vision was so strong he could still recall the feeling of the walls of her pussy squeezing him into ecstasy. His imagination continued to improve as he began to conjure up her lips surrounding his cock. Suckling him like a sugarplum.

His own groaning was audible, he slowly opened his eyes. It was barely light in the room. The sensation of Lorna pleasing him orally didn't go away. Glancing down his body he beheld a vision of loveliness.

It was no dream. The woman he'd fallen for years ago truly tasted to him like her favorite treat. His dreams had become reality in a beautiful way.

"Good morning, sleepy head."

Yes it was. "Morning, gorgeous."

"I thought I'd return the favor."

"Be my guest." Reaching down, he pushed her curls away from her face and stroked her cheek. She winked at him and continued.

He closed his eyes and enjoyed. Her soft hand moved up and down his cock, squeezing and pumping his erection as her mouth drew on him and sucked him deep. His head repeatedly brushed the back of her throat.

When her delicious torture had him hovering on the brink of completion, he said, "Come here, sugarplum."

Giving his dick one final lick, she crawled up his body. When she was positioned perfectly above his erection, he drove into her.

The sight of Lorna riding him in the dawn of Christmas morning captured his heart for eternity. "Marry me."

"What?" Tilting her head forward, she opened her eyes. She blinked a few times trying to clear away the lusty fog from her gaze.

Holding her hips firmly, he continued to pump into her tight sheath. "Marry me," he growled. His balls were taut between his legs with the need to climax.

Placing her hands on his chest, Lorna attempted to halt their lovemaking. He wouldn't allow her to stop them, rotating his hips he aimed for the pleasant spot inside of her.

The melodic sound coming out of her mouth as she threw her head back and ground against him, let him know he'd stroked the spot right. Slowing his thrust downward, he made his request again, "Marry me, Lorna."

"Richard, I...can't...think," she whimpered.

"I don't want you to think, baby, I want you to feel." Lifting his hips, he pushed to the hilt. "I love you and I'm not going to let you leave me again."

"Stop, Richard, please."

Hearing the plea in her voice, he ceased his movements.

"Are you serious?" Her brown eyes roamed around his face.

"Yes. Nine years ago you left and I didn't think I'd ever have a moment to tell you how I feel. I'm not going to let that happen again."

She tried to rise.

He held her in place.

"I don't have anything to offer you." There was water in her gaze. "I have no money. No job. No place to live that's mine. I can't cook."

"Your heart, Lorna, that's all I want." Rising up, he kissed her. "Besides I am in serious need of an accountant and bookkeeper."

Tears rolled out of her eyes, as she laughed. "You want to use me for my skills."

Rotating his hips, he moved his cock inside of her. "All of your skills." His hands moved around her hips and up her back. "I don't want you to hate living in Carlton County. Then blame me for keeping you here. If you decide you don't want to be here I will sell the restaurant to my aunt and cousins and move where ever you desire."

Flinging herself against his chest, she hugged him and rained kisses over his face. "I love you, Richard. I've loved you even before you kissed my flip-flops off against that tree."

"So, is that a yes?"

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" Her eyes went round. "It's Christmas and I have to get home." She made a move to get up.

"The hell you will. Neither one of us are going anywhere until we finish what we started," he grumbled.

"Oh," she smiled. Leaning into him, she swiveled her hips and lowered herself along his cock. "First things first, I guess."

"You better believe it."

* * *

"You two are just in time for breakfast," her mom said as she and Richard arrived at the house shortly after sunrise.

Embracing her mother, Lorna was amazed how her parents seemed at ease with the fact she'd been snowed in a house all night with a virile, single man.

"Great, I am starving," Richard kissed her mother on the cheek.

They all moved into the kitchen where her father was pulling out the ingredients for breakfast. Crossing the room, she received a kiss from her father. Richard and her dad shook hands and exchanged small talk about the snow outside and Mr. Julian's plow.

Lorna left them all downstairs and went up to her room and changed clothes. She'd showered with Richard before they left his house.

When breakfast was complete and they all sat around the half of the table that wasn't covered with her mom's puzzle, she said, "Mom, Dad, I need to tell you all something."

She noticed her mother looking from her and Richard expectantly. Before she told them the news that apparently they were expecting, she needed to be honest. "I didn't know how to tell you all this, but I came home because I lost my job months ago."

"Are you all right? Do you need money for rent?"

Her mother was speechless, her mouth gaped and her hand covering her heart.

"There's no need for that now, Dad. I lost my apartment this month even with all my saving. I had no other options but to come home."

"Why didn't you tell us?" her mother reached over and stroked her arm.

Lorna shrugged. "Shame mostly. I pushed so hard to make it then the bottom fell out. I was too stubborn to quit when I was ahead. Then everything snowballed."

"Well, you're too smart for something not to come along, soon," her dad got up and hugged her.

"And if it doesn't you always have a home. Whatever the reason I'm glad to have you here."

"Thanks." She took the napkin from Richard and wiped her face and eyes, clearing off the tears. "I love you both so much."

"We love you, too." Her parents echoed in unison.

Richard stroked her back as his warm gaze assessed her, inquiring if she were okay.

She nodded.

Turning towards her parents, Richard spoke, "Mr. and Mrs. Morgan, I'd love the honor of having your daughters hand in marriage."

Her mother screamed, clapped her hands and threw her arms around Lorna and Richard at the same time.

"Now, that's a Christmas present," her father commented as he rose from his chair and came around the table. "I'd be glad to give my approval." He gave Richard a hug and a pat on his shoulder as he reached over and embraced her with his other arm.

"Well, I have something else for you and mom." Dragging everyone into the living room, she presented her parents with the gifts she bought them.

"Honeybear, this is perfect." Her dad admired the craftsmanship of the bear carving along the body of the cane.

"I'm glad you like it, Dad. I figured it would help getting around during the winter when your legs get stiff."

Her father kissed her on the cheek again.

"Lorna, where'd you find these pictures?" Her mother held up the quilt with all three of their baby pictures screened on three of the squares.

"One day I was going through some boxes in the attic and found your picture in grandpa's things. I called Uncle Greg and got a picture of dad. Mine was easier to find."

They all laughed.

"I love it, sweetheart." They hugged.

"I know how much you like reading by the fire or working on your puzzles, that way you'll be warm and won't have to put on so many layers."

Her mother nodded. "Do you want your gift now?"

Shaking her head, she said, "No, I'd rather wait. I think I have everything I need right here."

Crossing the room, she slipped her arms around Richard.

His arms tightened around her as he kissed her on the forehead.

Lorna looked around the room at the people she loved the most in the world. It had taken her nine years to realize that she was running away from the life she wanted instead of to it. She was willing to place a bet on every holiday mistletoe that she'd never forget again.

Happy Holidays!