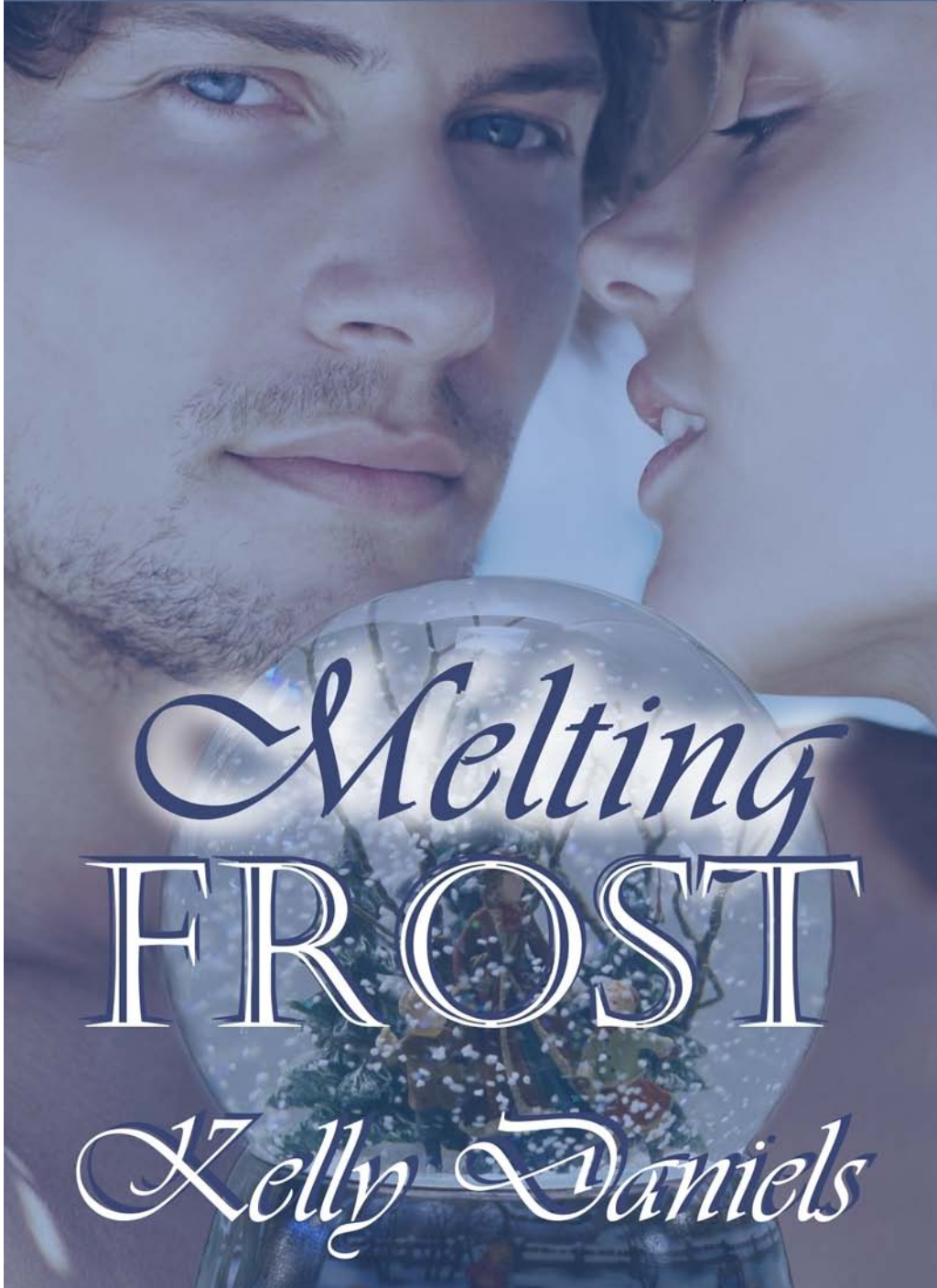


Decadent Publishing



Melting
FROST

Kelly Daniels

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Melting Frost

by

Kelly Daniels

~DEDICATION~

For Holly

Chapter One

"I'll be home for Christmas; you can plan on me..." Rory sang happily along with the radio as she drove over the dark country highway. The full moon illuminated the snow-covered fields, creating a silvery winter wonderland. In two more hours, she would be home and surrounded by the family she so dearly missed.

It had been six months since she'd seen her family, and she relished the chance to spend a full week with them. Her sister and brother-in-law would be there with their twins and her brother had returned after spending the last two Christmases in Iraq.

She glanced at the dashboard clock. Twelve-fifteen. As usual, she was running late but it didn't matter. Now it was officially Christmas Eve, she couldn't be happier.

"...I'll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams." She continued to sing as her cell phone rang on the seat next to her. As she reached for it, she glanced at the screen and smiled. Her brother's name appeared on the caller ID. He was probably calling to give her a hard time about being late and trying to figure out when she'd arrive so he could wait outside with a pile of snowballs. She had named him her own personal Grinch, but the fact he had made it home from war softened her towards his antics. Even if it meant a noogie or wedgie, she was going to give him the bear hug of his life.

She flipped open the phone and held it to her ear. "Scotty!"

"Merry Christmas," her brother's voice cut in and out through the bad connection, "Where—hell are you?"

"I'm still a couple of hours away...Scotty?" She waited, but no answer. "Are you there?" There was only dead silence on the other end of the line. Looking at the screen, she saw that the service bars had all but vanished. She scanned through the recent call list and was about to dial him back

when the sedan's tires lost traction and began to drift toward the ditch. She dropped the phone and gripped the steering wheel, trying to maneuver the vehicle back on to the road as she pumped at the brakes, but the car began to spin. Scotty's voice penetrated her fear, and she remembered his advice when she had first learned to drive. Releasing the brake, she turned the wheel to follow the movement of the car.

Her heart raced and her breathing caught as she squeezed her eyes shut, unable to take in the spiraling landscape outside any longer, and prayed for the car to come to a rest. Just when she thought it would never end, there was a sickening thud as the frame came into abrupt contact with a tree and the air bag burst in her face.

Everything went dark.

Chapter Two

The air howled around him as he rode the northern wind through the crystal clear night sky. The holidays were approaching, and he was becoming more and more bitter with each passing day.

Jack dove towards the Earth as the twinkling city lights below him rivaled the stars and drew his curiosity. Swirling past window after window, he watched families prepare for Christmas. He imagined sitting by the fire, sipping hot chocolate and reading holiday stories with them, but his presence quickly created intricate frost patterns that raced across the glass panes and obscured his view.

His isolation gnawed at him. During this time of year, as the days grew shorter and the nights longer, he had nothing but the endless cold and silence—only the occasional howling winds to keep him company.

Shooting towards the twinkling lights of the heavens, he wished for the same thing he did every Christmas: someone to spend it with. A shooting star streaked across the sky and over the horizon, drawing his attention back to the land below.

He watched as a car spun on ice like a child's Hanukkah dreidel. He'd witnessed such accidents on many occasions, especially during the long winter months, but this time something was different. An unseen force pulled him toward the car as it came to a violent stop at the base of a clump of trees. The branches of the towering pines practically covered the small sedan, and all that was visible were the glowing red tail lights.

Creeping slowly on the breeze, he approached the trees and inspected the damage. The front of the vehicle was crumpled from the impact, but the metal cage of the car looked to be mostly intact. He swept aside the undergrowth and gazed into the car window. All he could see were auburn curls sprawled against the white airbag. He watched as the woman's head rolled toward the glass and dark eyes blinked at him, seeming to meet his

invisible ones. A shot of warmth passed through him, like she'd peered right into his soul, before they closed again in unconsciousness.

Had she really seen him?

The car's windows began to frost over in the night's cold, yet it didn't creep over her face; instead, it framed her delicate features in a magical way. He studied her for a few more minutes before slipping between the cracks of broken windshield and settled himself in the passenger seat next to her. She groaned as if sensing movement and turned toward him again. Long lashes fluttered, her evergreen gaze arresting him on the spot. He let out a small groan of his own. The closer he looked, he realized they were the color of Christmas holly, bright and clear despite what had just happened to her. He had the strangest urge to bury his face in her coppery curls to see if she smelled like it, too.

"Who are you?" Though her lips barely moved, her gaze locked with his.

"Jack Frost. You can see me?" he asked in astonishment, his voice was usually a mere whisper in the wind but now it sounded human.

She squeezed her eyes shut for an instant and then looked at him again. "I'm Rory and, yeah, I can see you."

He glanced down and froze. His body was corporeal, dressed in jeans and a thick black wool coat. Holding up his hands, he examined them with awe before bringing them to his face, running over what felt like stubble. The rough surface must be what people called a five o'clock shadow.

"What happened?" The woman next to him sat up straighter in her seat and grimaced as she rubbed her neck. It took him a moment to compose the exhilaration surging through him; he couldn't believe what was happening.

He was real.

A strange sensation raced up his arm as he traced his fingerprints across the frosted window. He actually *felt* the cold.

"Umm, your car spun out on black ice." At least he thought that was what had happened.

“Have you called for a tow truck yet?” She looked visibly shaken. One of her trembling hands lifted to her forehead and the other started searching for something in the dark car.

“No.” He watched her with interest before asking, “What are you doing?”

“Looking for my cell phone, I had it just before the accident.”

He inspected the area and saw the phone lying at his feet. As he bent, his forehead came in to contact with the dashboard with a loud thud. He shook his head and reached for the device. After picking it up and handing it to her, he sat back in his seat and rubbed his own forehead just as she had done earlier. The throbbing pressure must be pain—which he had only *heard of*.

“Thanks.” She stared at him as if seeing him for the first time before she turned and looked out the window. “Where am I?” She shifted in her seat, putting as much space between them as she possibly could. “What are you doing in my car?”

“I, um...” He didn’t want to scare her but he had to think quickly. “I was out walking, and I saw your car crash into these trees.”

He didn’t move as her gaze roamed over him in an appraising manner. She relaxed a bit, as if accepting his answer, then started to fiddle with her phone, hitting the power button repeatedly.

“It’s dead, do you have a phone?”

“No.” He’d never had to call anyone. There was no reason to. Whenever he wished to seek anyone out, which admittedly wasn’t often, he simply willed himself to—speaking telepathically or appearing before them. But then who really was there to talk to? He’d been alone for so long.

“Well, is there one anywhere near by?” Her brow furrowed as she tried to peer out the frosty car windows again. “Is your car nearby?”

“I don’t have one,” he said, honestly. He had never needed a car either. He could travel anywhere, any time the winds blew.

She looked taken aback as if the idea was unreal. “What are you doing out here without a phone or a car?”

“A quiet holiday with no distractions.” He tried for a reassuring smile as he noted that she was starting to shiver from the night’s cold. Recalling his recent trip over the countryside, he remembered seeing a small house hidden back in the trees. “We should go to my cabin so you can warm up, then we’ll figure out a way to get you some help.”

Chapter Three

The white countryside had seemed so beautiful when she was in her nice warm car driving through it. Now, she struggled to follow Jack through the almost knee-deep snow; it wasn't as enchanting. He had offered to carry her, but it was bad enough that she was following some stranger into the woods. She pulled her cell out of her pocket again and hit the power button. After a second, she was rewarded with a beep and the phone clicked on.

"Stop," she called to Jack, who was a few paces ahead of her now. As the device finished its start up, she silently wished for it to work. With another beep, it turned on completely. Holding it high above her head, she searched for a signal but there wasn't even the slightest change in service bars. Watching the screen intently, she moved backward toward the road until she was rewarded with one bar. She let out an excited squeal and took another step back but the signal disappeared. When she stepped forward, it returned. She dialed her brother's number as fast as she could and prayed the service would hold.

"You hung up on me." Her brother's teasing voice sent a spurt of relief through her.

"No, the service out here sucks. My car went off the road and into some trees." She looked over at Jack who was waiting patiently for her.

"Are you okay?"

Her heart melted at the concern. Tears pricked her eyes. *Oh, God. All I want is to go home to see him and the rest of my family.* She cleared her throat. Now was not the time to break down. "Yeah, I'm okay. A passerby stopped to help me."

"Where are you?" The line started to crackle with static. "I'll come pick you up."

"I'm still a couple of hours away." Before she knew it, she was talking to dead air. She tried to find her tiny little pocket of service again, but it was

gone. Her shoulders slumped as she glanced at Jack. *Please don't be a crazy serial killer.*

He was looking at her curiously, clutching her suitcase in his arms with no hat or gloves to protect him from the blustery winds, yet he didn't seem bothered by them. She, on the other hand, could feel the cold creeping into her bones. Flipping the phone shut, she walked to where Jack was waiting for her.

"I got a hold of my brother and told him what's going on, but we got cut off, again." The winds picked up and howled around them, sending shivers through her body, and her teeth started to chatter. "Please tell me you have a fire going."

"Of course," he said, with a gleam in his blue eyes. He turned, and she continued to follow him a couple hundred yards across the open fields, then into a wooded area. She smelled the smoky aroma of a fireplace just before the illuminated windows of a small log cabin came into view.

"How long have you been staying out here?"

"Not long," he said, as he opened the door. A sense of peace and calmness swept over her as she stepped over the threshold and the warmth of a blazing fire greeted them. She happily walked into the small cozy space. It wasn't much, a tiny kitchen in one corner, a bed in the other, and two wing-backed chairs and a couch framed the large stone fireplace on the other side of the room.

"This is so quaint." She sat down on an old log bench next to the door and pulled her snow-covered boots off.

"I like it," he said, as he placed her suitcase on the wrought iron bed. "Why don't you have a seat in front of the fire and I'll make us hot chocolate."

"That'd be great, thanks." She drew her heavy down jacket off and slowly walked around the room, inspecting her surroundings. Antique fishing gear hung above the fireplace and Tiffany-style lamps sat on both ends of the couch. The furnishings were eclectic but they all worked together. The place was like she'd stepped back in time—a world away from

the dirty, loud city she had grown accustomed to after college. She loved her job working for a non-profit foundation, but the crazy hours and heavy workload were driving her crazy. This was definitely more simple and relaxed. No wonder Jack had no need of a phone or car here.

A teakettle whistled behind her, drawing her attention to the man that had come to her rescue. She watched as he moved with ease around the tiny kitchen. He caught her staring at him and smiled before returning to their drinks. There was something captivating about him and the way he looked at her—intense, yet at times in awe like she was the first person to touch his tough exterior. He was a puzzle to her, but the safety and comfort of his presence at least didn't send her running back out into the cold.

“Here we go.” Jack handed her a steaming red ceramic mug.

“Mmmm, this smells fantastic.” She inhaled the decadent chocolaty aroma and sat on the couch. “What are the plans to get my car towed?”

“Well,” he hesitated then glanced down at the clock on the end table, “it's nearly two in the morning. It would be best to wait until the sun comes up.”

She frowned. “Then what?”

“And then we can walk a few miles to the nearest gas station or until your phone has service again,” he suggested.

Rory nodded. There was nothing else she could do but wonder why she wasn't more apprehensive about being in the remote cabin with this stranger. She sipped her hot chocolate, allowing the rich liquid to warm her insides. Glancing up, she watched the awe on his face as he did the same. They shared a smile and for some reason, all her concerns drifted away.

Jack was relieved when he found his magic still intact. With a bare whisper to the wind, he had the cabin prepared for them with food stocked in the cupboards and a roaring fire. But that was about as far as enchantment could take him. It couldn't make him charming or tell him all the right things to say.

When it came to Rory, he was on his own.

He sat in one of the armchairs and watched over her as she slept on the couch. Never had a human taken notice of him or actually seen him in tangible form, but Rory proved the impossible. He lifted his hand, studying the bumps and curves of the knuckles, noting the faint outlines of veins under his skin. Then he placed his palm against his heart and felt the light pounding. The steady beat filled him with hope instead of his usual despair and loneliness.

Glancing back at Rory, his insides tightened and he would have laughed at the sensation, except he knew a miracle when he saw it. There was something special about Rory. She radiated warmth—something unknown to him in his whole existence. She was somehow responsible for his transformation but he didn't understand how or why. He was sure she wouldn't know either. Would it last or would he go back to what he was before? Giving him a glimpse at the life he so envied, the feel of heat on his skin, a reason to smile—only to take it all away—now that would be a cruel joke.

The flickering flames crackled in the fireplace and wind pushed against the windowpanes of the cabin. Sleep called to him, his eyelids felt heavy, and he looked at the angel on the couch one last time before he drifted off into dreams.

Jack smelled coffee, the rich fragrance pulling him from his sleep, and he had to blink at the brightness streaming in from the windows. He lifted his arms out from under the blanket and stared down at the thin fleece covering him. Warmth rushed through him. Rory must have covered him while he was sleeping. Wiping at his sleepy eyes, he sat up. His body protested as he tried to stretch out the cramped muscles.

“Morning,” Rory called from the kitchenette. He watched as she poured a steaming mug of coffee and brought it over to him. “How'd you sleep?”

“Like a rock.” He took the cup from her and inhaled deeply. “But I kind of feel like one now, too.” He rolled his shoulders and neck again, trying to loosen the kinks.

“Sleeping in a chair like that will do that to you.”

“How’d you sleep?” His breath caught at the sunlight surrounding her, basking her in a glow, emphasizing her beauty—a sight he’d remember forever.

“Pretty good actually.” She sat down in the middle of the couch, pulling her feet under her and dragging the quilt over her lap. “I’m not even that banged up from the accident. Speaking of which, any idea how I can get a tow truck?”

“No,” he said, a bit too quickly. He had promised her that they would go for help this morning, but the thought of her leaving sent an unpleasant chill down his spine. He didn’t want her to go; he didn’t want this new experience to end. There had to be a way to keep her here, even for just a bit longer. Images of riding the wind alone and aimlessly painting window after window with frost struck fear in his heart. She’d never see him again if he returned to his old self. There’d be no way to prove his existence.

With a push of his will, he heard the wind pick up outside and clouds full of fresh snow rolled in and blocked the sun. He pointed toward the window as the first of the snowflakes started to fall. “It looks like there’s a storm coming. We’d have to hike to the highway and then it’s still a few miles to the nearest phone. It’d be better if we wait until after the storm passes.” He stilled as he watched her gaze down into her coffee mug. Guilt struck him in the chest. “You’re missing out on some big plans, I assume.” He gave himself a mental shake as he noted the sarcastic lilt in his tone.

“Not really, just the usual traditions with my family.” She pulled the old patchwork quilt more tightly around herself, her glistening eyes flickered over him for an instant before staring into the waning fire.

Jack swallowed hard and bit back his frown. “Then why do you look so sad?”

“For the first time in like five years, everyone is going to be home. My parents, my sister and her husband and kids, and my brother is back from Iraq. I was looking forward to spending time with them and doing all the same stuff that we did when we were kids.”

“Like?” he prompted. He wished he had the same story to share, but the thought of his own family brought a wave of sadness.

“Like...going out into the woods and hunting down the perfect Christmas tree, watching old Christmas movies by the fire, and being in the kitchen with mom as she prepares dinner. All the little stuff that makes the day special.” Rory stopped for a moment as her voice caught. “What about your parents, your family? Do they have any traditions?”

Jack froze, silence filling the air. Rory sat patiently awaiting his answer. He swallowed hard. “You mean Old Man Winter and the Ice Queen?” She giggled and a smile touched his lips. “No, they don’t celebrate. This is their busy time of year.” He almost laughed out loud at the thought of his parents being warm and sentimental.

“So, they work a lot?”

“You could say that. They consider me the slacker because that’s not the type of life I wanted, but at the same time, I’m cursed to follow in their footsteps.” He wondered what they would think if they knew he was here—in human form. *Did they have something to do with this or is this my wish being granted?*

“Is that why you’re out here all alone?”

He shrugged, and this time he was the one to turn and stare into the fire. If this was his wish being granted, how long would it last?

When he glanced back, Rory had gotten up from the couch and had gone to her suitcase. She rummaged through her bag until she found a thick pair of wool socks, then sat down on the wooden bench next to the door and pulled them on over the socks she was already wearing.

“You better get bundled up because if I’m going to be stuck here for Christmas, we need to have a Christmas tree.” She pulled on her boots, then found her scarf and wrapped it around her neck.

“It’s snowing out.” He pointed to the window again at the building storm. The idea of venturing outside into the cold didn’t appeal to him. He’d rather stay in and hear more about her family.

“It won’t take that long. And the snow makes it all the more magical, don’t you think?”

Her bright smile sent a flutter of warmth through him. He nodded and stood up. If she wanted a tree, then he was willing to face the cold. For her. “I’ll go get the ax.”

Chapter Four

They walked through the woods for a while, neither one speaking as they searched for a Christmas tree. Jack would point to every evergreen he saw but none of them were right, and she'd keep walking. When she started to believe this holiday completely cursed, she spotted the idyllic symbol of the season ten yards in front of them.

"This is it," she shouted with excitement as she ran ahead of him and examined the tree more closely. Not too small, not too big—it was perfect.

"You're sure this is the one?" he joked, raising one eyebrow at her.

"Yes, this is it." She wanted no other.

"I've never done this before, much less decorated a Christmas tree." Jack brushed away some of the snow that had collected on the branches before he started to clear away some of the lower undergrowth.

With a frown, Rory thought back to all the times her family had gone out and hunted for the ideal tree. It was sad that Jack had never done this. Recalling the conversation in the cabin, she remembered how he'd gotten very quiet when she'd asked him about his family, but he'd hung onto her every word when she talked about her own family's traditions.

She thought of her brother and their constant mischievous games. There was another tradition she needed to uphold. She bent to the ground and gathered snow in her hands, forming a tightly shaped ball. It was the perfect consistency—not too wet, not too dry. Holding in her giggle, she saw her target. Jack's butt.

As he continued to chip away at the tree's trunk with the ax, Rory took aim. She threw the round sphere, hitting his left cheek. He instantly straightened and whirled around. Ignoring his aghast expression, she dropped down and formed another snowball. This time, she struck his chest before he had a chance to arm himself.

“Oh, this means war,” Jack said, as a smile spread across his face. The ax slipped out of his hands to the snowbank, and he bent to gather his own ammo.

Rory darted behind a nearby tree and formed another snowball as he began to chase her. She ran from one tree to the next. His snowball flew by her, just grazing her legs as she jetted past him. When she rounded the next tree, he appeared suddenly. She almost fell backward, but he caught her, pulling her close.

In that instant, with his arms wrapped around her, she looked up into his arctic blue gaze and large snowflakes fell around them. The moment seemed magical, and there was nowhere else in the world she would rather be. He leaned down; his lips touched hers as she closed her eyes. She inhaled the scent of fresh pine that clung to him, and her heart began to race as his stubble scraped against her cheek. She darted her tongue against his. He tasted like everything she associated with winter—hot chocolate, peppermint, snow, and cinnamon all wrapped into one.

The storm picked up and whipped around them. Flakes formed into tiny darts of ice, assaulting them and breaking their connection.

“We better hurry and get back to the cabin.” Reluctantly, she drew away. The wind blew even harder, and she lifted a hand to shield her face from the sharp pricks. It looked like a blizzard was coming. Jack didn’t seem concerned but he nodded and went back over to the tree and picked up the ax. After a couple of hard swift swings, the evergreen fell to the ground. She took the ax from him, and he dragged the tree back towards the cabin.

Jack made Rory go inside to warm up as he searched around the outside of the cabin for a couple of boards to use as a base for the tree like he had seen on corner Christmas tree lots in big cities. As he hammered the boards onto the trunk, his mind kept going back to the kiss. The instant his lips had touched hers, he’d been flooded in a warmth he had never experienced. He had thawed inside out, and now that she wasn’t here next to him, icy

shards of night air crept back in. Her heat was addicting, and he wanted more of it.

When he finished with the stand, Rory was at the door waiting for him. She opened it and closed it again as the wind and snow pounded against the cabin. Now he regretted putting so much power into the storm, especially since it had broken their kiss.

He put the tree in the corner next to the fireplace and stepped back to admire his handiwork. The tall evergreen leaned a bit to the left but looked like it belonged there. Excitement pulsed through him.

“It looks great. You wouldn’t have any decorations around here, would you?” Rory asked, hopefully.

He thought for a moment and scanned the cabin. There weren’t a lot of places to hide boxes of decorations. He went to the closet and glanced inside. It was empty except for some old blankets and some clothes for him, and with Rory peering over his shoulder, there was no way he could conjure anything. Sparks of heat, magic that only he could see, jumped between them as he turned and his arm brushed against hers. He noticed an attic entrance in front of the bathroom. When he reached the door, he pulled at the ceiling panel and a wooden ladder descended. He climbed up and poked his head into the dark attic. It took him a moment for his eyes to adjust, but he could see that the small space was empty, too. He didn’t want to let her down, so he used his powers to produce a box of antique ornaments and garland—complete with years of dust.

He was glad he did. Her face lit up as he carried the box down the stairs and handed it to her. “Looks like you lucked out, this was the only thing up there. I’ll make you a deal. You decorate and I’ll make dinner,” he offered. He didn’t know how to cook but he had enchantment on his side.

“If that includes hot chocolate and popcorn while I’m decorating, then it’s a deal.” Her gaze was intent and full of admiration as she carefully examined each of the old-fashioned ornaments.

Her joy sent another flutter of warmth through him. “You drive a hard bargain but I think I can handle it.”

Jack watched her with fascination as he pretended to prepare dinner. She was almost finished rearranging the ornaments on the tree for the third time, and she had cut some branches off to cover the fireplace mantle and used the leftover ornaments and garland to decorate it. The shiny glass balls along with the fragrance of the crackling fire, mingling with freshly cut pine tree, gave the cabin an instant transformation—like all the windows that he peered in, except he was on the other side of the glass pane. A shot of cold blasted through his soul, trying to pull him back, but he pushed it aside. He wasn't going to allow himself to go there, to that lonely place. Not tonight.

While Rory wasn't looking, he flicked a finger at the kitchen and everything went to work. The pots and pans were clean, a turkey and the traditional fixings were in the oven, and two place settings were waiting to be laid out on the counter.

He took his hot chocolate and a refill for Rory, then sat down on the couch to watch her work her own magic. She turned toward the kitchen, then around again as if surprised to find him next to her. "You're all done?"

"Almost, it'll take about another half an hour," he said, holding out a mug for her. She took it and sat down next to him. "It was fun watching you work. You were so engrossed with what you were doing. It looks amazing."

"Thanks." A blush rose in her cheeks as she surveyed her work. "It does, doesn't it?"

He struggled with what to do next. His fingers itched to tuck the strand of hair behind her ear and graze the softness of her cheek, but would she jump from his touch? Should he just put his arm around her shoulders?

Rory continued to scrutinize the tree; her gaze directed at a grouping of Santa-themed figurines at the top. A soft smile played her lips, and he could almost see her mind working, mentally rearranging the ornaments again.

"The tree looks absolutely perfect," he said. He took her hand, instead. Heat jolted up his arm like fire as she turned her palm up and tightened her

fingers around his. It was the most wonderful sensation in the whole world, but she let go and stood up.

“Well, since dinner will be ready soon, I had better go change.” She set her mug on the coffee table and went to her luggage.

“Change?”

“It’s another tradition. We always dress up for Christmas Eve dinner,” she replied, as she pulled her whole suitcase into the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

Jack stared at the wooden panel, stunned, yet confused. *Guess this means I should do the same.* He raked his mind at all the images he’d seen through windows. Then a smile spread across his face.

Chapter Five

Rory marveled at the ease she felt around Jack—like she'd known him her whole life. *And the kiss.* She sighed. She couldn't stop thinking about it. His mouth had started out as hard and cold as ice but then warmed into the perfect match for hers. She fantasized about those lips the entire time she was decorating, sneaking glances at him every chance she got.

She showered and changed into the red wrap dress she had planned on wearing to her parent's dinner party that night. It clung to her in all the right places, which was why she loved it. All she needed now were the matching earrings.

Digging around in her suitcase, she pushed aside some of her clothes, and the jeans she'd worn earlier fell over the side. Picking it up, she heard a clatter and glanced down to see her cell on the floor. Service bars in the top corner glowed. With a squeal, she reached for the phone. Her heart ached at the thought of missing the special times with her family. She quickly dialed her parent's home number. Hopefully, the evil device wouldn't play any more tricks on her and allow her a full phone call for once.

"Ho, ho, ho," Scotty's voice greeted her. She could hear music and talking in the background. The party was underway, and she knew without a doubt that her brother was wearing a Santa hat and fake white beard entertaining everyone.

"Merry Christmas to you, too."

"Rory, finally. Where are you? Mom is freaked out."

"Tell her not to worry, I'm fine. And as soon as the storm clears, I'll be home."

"Yeah, one hell of a blizzard, isn't it? The weathermen completely messed up by missing this one. You should see the drifts of snow in front of the garage. I'm saving that part of the shoveling for you."

"Gee, thanks. How are the festivities?"

"Spirited, as always. Wish you were here."

“I do, too, but I’m okay here. Wish everyone a Merry Christmas for me?”

“Sure. Be safe.”

“I will. Bye,” she said quietly, as she hung up. For a minute, she felt like she was going to cry. Her family was celebrating without her. Wiping at her cheeks, she heard a *clunk* from the living room. Her stomach fluttered at the notion of spending a quiet evening snowed in with Jack.

Rory gave herself another once over in the tiny bathroom mirror before taking a deep breath. Ready to face Jack, she whipped the door open and stepped out. His back was to her when she moved. He had changed into black pants and white shirt, even wearing shiny black shoes. She wondered why and how he had dress clothes in the middle of nowhere. There wouldn’t be need for them, unless....The thought vanished the second he turned around, and the look on his face made her heart flip.

“You look stunning,” he said. His eyes lit, and she had to smooth a hand over her dress to calm her nerves. He closed the distance between them and offered his arm. “Shall we?”

It was then she noticed the small kitchen table, set for two, and lit candles all around. He led her over to one of the chairs and pulled it out for her, then poured her a glass of red wine. “I’m impressed.”

“That’s not all. Look what I found.” Jack went to the small window over the sink and adjusted the knobs on an old radio. Vintage Christmas carols began to softly play throughout the cabin. He worked at the counter for a few minutes, before carrying two plates to the table. Rory couldn’t help but smile.

“If I was home right now, this is exactly what I would be having.” She imagined the banquet table that her mother would have set up, lined with a huge turkey, mashed potatoes, stuffing, and containers of different casseroles and side dishes that the party guests would bring. Of course, her favorite part was the dessert table that would be covered with cheesecakes and cookies.

“You’re really homesick, aren’t you?”

Rory blinked. She hadn't noticed the sheen of tears that had covered her eyes until she looked at him across the table. He shimmered in the candlelight. "A little bit. I was able to call home and tell everyone that I'm okay. Even with the snowstorm, my parent's customary dinner party is in full swing."

"I am sorry that you can't be there with them tonight, Rory." Jack reached across the table and took her hand in his.

"It's not your fault, you can't control the weather," she said, as she squeezed his fingers. She wanted to change the subject before she really started to cry. Tonight was Christmas Eve, and she was going to be happy and enjoy herself. She released him and picked up her wine glass for a toast. "Here's to you, Jack, for creating a spectacular Christmas feast. This smells amazing."

"I slaved in the kitchen all day," he joked, as they each took a sip of their wine. "One more," he raised his glass again, "Here's to you, Rory, for sharing with me the most wonderful Christmas I've had in centuries and for rescuing me from the cold."

She laughed as they clinked glasses again. "You rescued *me* from the cold."

"Let's just say that we rescued each other."

"May I have this dance?" Jack rose from his seat and went around the table to her.

Dinner finished, they were both lulled and relaxed from good food and company. With a slight nod of her head, Rory took his hand and stood as Bing Crosby crooned through the tiny radio's speakers. He held her in his arms like he had earlier in the day, but now it seemed much more intimate.

Rory was someone special—precious. She wasn't like all the mindless shopping drones that worried more about money than family. Her warmth radiated through him as they clung to each other and moved slowly to the music. He hoped their time would never end.

Suddenly, an inferno engulfed him. He clutched her tightly to him, no longer dancing, and just held her. The tightness in his chest became unbearable.

“I need some air,” he mumbled. He moved away and went outside. On the porch, he stared up into the darkness. The clouds had cleared, and the night sky was iridescent with starlight but standing out in the glacial air, he was cold. The arctic night no longer welcomed him with an open embrace.

What was happening to him? With each passing moment he spent with her, the ice inside him was thawing; he could feel his old self slip away, and he didn’t want to let her go. This was what he’d wished for on so many stars that he’d lost count. But now that it had been granted, he didn’t know if he could trust it—if he could trust himself. Rory was what he had always yearned for, but guilt whirled in his chest. He was hurting her by keeping her from the perfect Christmas.

“Are you okay?” Rory asked, from the open door behind him.

Jack drew in a deep breath, but didn’t turn around. “This is the first Christmas I remember not hating, and it’s probably your worst.”

“What are you talking about?”

“For as long as I can remember, I’ve hated Christmas. Each year I would get more and more resentful as I watched families celebrating. Even as much as I hated it, I longed to have someone to celebrate with. Then you came along and my wish was granted. I’m stuck in a remote cabin with the most beautiful, caring, woman in the world, and it’s ruining her Christmas.”

“Jack,” she said, as she came up behind him. She leaned against his back and wrapped her arms around him and, again, the warmth she projected felt like a firestorm. “My Christmas isn’t ruined, and is by no means the worst holiday I’ve ever had. I have someone that I care about to celebrate with. That’s all that matters.”

“But your family—”

“My family will be there when we get out of here. Sure, I might have missed tree hunting and dinner with them, but I got to do that with you.”

As he turned and looked down into her angelic face, full of sincerity, he heard his father's voice whisper into the wind. *'It's your decision, my son, you must choose the world you've always known or the uncertain future of a mortal in love.'*

The more he looked in her eyes, the more he knew there was no choice. The only thing that mattered in the world, mythical or mortal, was in his arms. Cradling her face in his hands, he bent and rubbed his lips over hers. She sighed, and her fingers curled against his chest. The simple gesture was his undoing. The sweet, tender kiss intensified, drugging his senses. He swept her up, cradling her against the cold. "Let me have you tonight, Rory. Stay with me."

Rory's eyes rounded in surprise, her swollen lips formed a cute little *O*. And then she smiled. "Yes, Jack."

That was all the response he needed. Swinging her up in his arms, he kicked the door shut behind them and carried her to the bed.

Never had he known such sweet generosity and sincerity. Rory had given herself to him with all her heart last night. As dawn arrived, cool and bright, Jack knew his time with her was coming to an end. Her silky auburn waves formed a blanket on his chest, and the cadence of her soft, even breathing was his blessing and his curse. If she had taught him anything in their short time together, it was compassion. He stroked her satiny skin even as guilt poured through him. This wonderful, engaging woman deserved better than what he could give her. Rory had a family waiting for her—probably worried sick, and he had selfishly kept her to himself.

"Good morning." Vivid, alert green eyes met his gaze. Shyly, she cupped his cheek and kissed him.

"Good morning to you." He hugged her tighter, enjoying the silkiness of her skin.

"Why do you look so serious this morning?"

"I'm just...concerned."

She grinned. "No reason to be concerned, Jack. You were magnificent."

Jack wouldn't have thought it possible, given his current train of thought, but he laughed.

"Now that's more like it. Come on, I'll make breakfast."

He held her close to him. "Wait. I have a question for you. What would you like for Christmas?"

Her expression grew somber. She looked the same way she had at dinner last night when she'd talked about her family's party, and he knew she wanted to go home. From her stony silence, he could tell she probably didn't know how to tell him.

Rory trailed a finger over his jaw. "Do you know what I'd like more than anything in the whole wide world?"

"Hm?"

"Woolen socks. My feet are freezing!"

She rubbed her icy feet against his beneath the covers and was rewarded with his startled yelp. The cold truly was no longer his friend.

Jack nuzzled her neck, loving her warmth and ability to make him smile. "You know, naughty little girls don't get Christmas presents."

"Oh, yeah? What do they get?"

"Coal, I would think." He maneuvered her beneath him. "But you're not really a naughty girl. You're my own personal Christmas angel. So good, Rory." He kissed her senseless. As quickly as he had pounced, he released her and rolled away. "Now get dressed. Your present is waiting for you underneath the Christmas tree."

She met him in the living room, her eyes lit like a child's as she peered out the windows. "Oh, would you just look at that! It's a perfect winter wonderland!" Throwing her arms around him, she laughed with delight. "Merry Christmas, Jack."

"Merry Christmas, Rory. Now come see your gift." He settled her on his lap beside the tree and handed her a small square box covered in red foil. He had little magic left now, but he had enough for this.

Rory looked at him in surprise. "But how did you—?"

“Just open it.”

The foil went flying. “Oh, Jack,” she breathed. Nestled in the white satin lining of the box was a snow-globe. Inside the miniature winter scene was a cabin with two tiny figures outlined in its window. “It’s beautiful. Thank you.”

“That’s only part of your gift, angel.” His lips met hers in a perfect Christmas kiss—sweet, joyful and full of hope.

He held her close as wind, snow, and ice swirled around them, like they were the ones in the center of the snow globe, transporting them away in a matter of seconds. Completely oblivious to the magic that was flowing around her, Rory only hugged him tighter.

As their kiss ended, she leaned back from his arms. He watched as her eyes widened in shock as she scanned their surroundings. Gone was the quaint little cabin in the wilderness, and in its place was the street she had grown up on. The stately Tudor-style home where her parents still lived was alive and buzzing with holiday activity. Across the snow-covered lawn, a twinkling Christmas tree stood framed by big leaded glass windows, and the frosty air carried with it the aroma of burning wood in the fireplace, where the family had already begun to congregate, no doubt.

“How did you do that?” she asked in amazement. “That’s my parent’s house.”

“I know that this is what you wanted more than anything for Christmas.” He watched as she pressed a hand to her chest and nodded. The way she looked at him was the best present in the world.

“Incoming!” Someone shouted an instant before they were pelted with snowballs.

“Scotty!” Rory cried out.

Jack watched as she ran to her big brother and threw herself into his arms in a big hug. The love radiating from their expression gave him a sense of peace. Knowing that he had something to do with the happy reunion confirmed that he had made the right choice. He smiled as she gestured for him to come over to them.

“Scotty, this is Jack. Jack, this is my brother, Scott.”

“Nice to meet you,” Jack said, as he shook Scott’s hand. Like Rory, her brother had the same auburn hair and green eyes.

Scott eyed him up and down. “You must be something if she brought you home to face the family.”

“Should I be concerned?” Unease rolled through him but if her family was at all like Rory, he knew he would be fine and he would love them all.

“Have you ever faced a firing squad?”

Rory punched Scott in his side, and they both laughed.

“They aren’t that bad,” Rory said, as she wrapped her reassuring arms around Jack.

“You’ll see,” Scott said. He ducked out of Rory’s reach as she tried to jab him in the side again and ran up the porch steps. “I’ll go tell everyone to have questions ready to fire at will.” Rory let go of Jack and dipped towards the ground. A second later, Scott disappeared inside and the snowball hit the wreath on the front door.

Rory took his hand and led him up the porch steps. As excited as he was, Jack paused and drew a deep breath. Inside those doors were warmth and love of a family—something he had never experienced. It was something he allowed to chase him away every year, yet yearned for at the same time.

She must have noticed his indecision and stopped, resting her palm against his chest. The instant she touched him, heat seeped into his skin and melted his heart.

“It’s really cold out here. Are you ready to go in?” she asked. He looked past her through the large windows and saw her family carrying platters of food into the dining room as two little toddlers with ginger hair ran around their feet. He returned his attention to her holly-green eyes.

“In a minute, one thing first.” He let the last of his magic slip away to create a holiday staple. As mistletoe shimmered into existence above their heads, he felt the last remaining shard of ice inside him disappear. He

smiled at the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his now mortal life with, and bent to kiss her. "I love Christmas."

~ABOUT THE AUTHOR~

Kelly Daniels lives in Northern Illinois with her dogs Ari and Yeti. She enjoys reading, writing, Hollywood gossip and celebrating Champagne Thursday with her sisters. It's always Thursday somewhere.

***You can visit Kelly at:
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Be Mine

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Stubborn and independent, Elle Galligan wants to be left alone by her crazy ex-boyfriend, Lukas, who continues to terrorize her, each time more viciously than the last. With no choice, she seeks out the one man she's turned her back on from the past—only to be thrown into the unknown.

Successful Prince of Darkness, Larik deWolf, spots trouble the moment Elle calls him. In an ongoing war with Elle's shiftshaping ex, Larik is left with no alternative and vows to protect her from the evil stalking her, only to draw Elle closer into the mysterious world he hid. As danger strikes, history deems to repeat itself. When attraction binds them together, Elle threatens his supernatural abilities and control. Larik finds himself opening up his heart to the one woman he's tried not to love, but will she accept his secrets or continue to fight fate?

~Excerpt~

Sitting on the edge of Elizabeth's bed, Lukas was the picture of a man, perfectly content with his kingdom. If it weren't for that mammoth dog she insisted on keeping around, he would have been in heaven. The scratching and the whining at the bedroom door were shredding his resolve to remain calm.

"I really wish you'd get rid of that beast," he muttered. Judging from the silence that ensued, he decided it was best to leave that subject for another

time. There *would be* another time. And his Elizabeth would choose him over the dog and everything else she allowed in the way of their happiness. Sooner than she knew.

He moved from the bed and lazily strolled around her bedroom looking at the framed photos scattered over the dresser and bookshelves. “Do you remember the warm summer night we met? At that little Italian restaurant—Maria’s? You came up to me at the bar, wearing that pale blue sundress and asked me to dance because your friends dared you to.” He laughed at the happy memory. “We held each other outside under the stars until they threw us out.”

They had been inseparable from that moment on. He paused to smell the bouquet of fresh flowers she always kept next to the bed. It was one of the few girly indulgences she loved.

The card she’d given him on their first Valentine’s Day was still in his pocket. Inside she wrote, “To my one and only, eternally yours.” He kept it in a place of honor, next to his heart.

“I can’t believe it’s been two years already. Time sure does fly.” He lay down on the king-sized bed and stretched out, cradling his head in his hands. Staring up at the ceiling for a few minutes, he watched the arms of the ceiling fan spin in slow circles.

Memories assailed him, bringing back the bittersweet taste of all the days and nights they had spent exploring the city and the cozy nights at home, sitting on the couch, watching old movies. Of course, that’s when she had time to spend with him. When she wasn’t so busy focusing on her precious career or taking care of that little brat for her brother.

Every muscle in his body stiffened and restlessness crept through his veins. He rose from the bed, feeling the need to move around to release the tension. Crossing the room to the small table next to the windows, he picked up an antique silver frame containing a photo of his angel surrounded by her family.

“Baby,” he said, concisely. “I’m getting so sick of coming in third behind your work and your family!” He seethed as he threw the frame across the

room into the far wall to punctuate his point. The sound of shattering glass exploded, bouncing off the walls and piercing his heart. Instantly contrite, he hung his head.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. If you just wouldn’t make me so angry, I wouldn’t have to...” He let his words trail off with deadly sentiment as he heard the dog move away from the bedroom door.

Someone was here.

“You know, I think it’s time that I left anyway.” He went over to the chair next to the bedroom door where he had left a small black gift bag. Removing the contents, he arranged them neatly on the bed. “This is for later.”

His fingers traced the soft lace as he imagined her dressed in the black silk. The commotion at the front door broke into his thoughts.

“Later.” He smiled to himself again and moved to the window. A sweet, melodious voice floated to him as it told the dog to quiet down. He could have listened to her for hours, but right now, there wasn’t time. He paused and backtracked to the flowers, choosing one perfect white lily, then pressed the soft fragrant pedal to his lips. “Good night, my love.” He placed the flower on top of his gift and went back to the open window. Joy gripped him as he slipped outside and onto the fire escape. There had been a time when she thought sneaking into her bedroom window was the most romantic thing in the world. Did she still feel that way? Of course she had to. He leapt from the metal stairs, landing with cat-like grace on a narrow window-ledge on the building across the street. His heart jumped with excitement. He couldn’t wait to see her surprise at his gift.