



Champagne Rose

Home For Christmas

by

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Home For Christmas

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Dedication

Jennifer, I still miss you. Rest in peace. This one's for you.

Reviews of Pam Champagnes other works...

Dance For You (Part of the Up Close and Personal Anthology)-"This was a great book! Ms. Champagne writes an action packed, fast paced book that will keep you on the edge of your seat wanting more. The sex is hot and the interactions between Lara and Reino is enough to singe your eyebrows. If there is a real Reino out there, I'd like to give you my phone number."-6 Wands, Astrea, Enchanted Ramblings

"*Dead Heat* is full of twists and turns with murders and suspicions running galore and Ms. Champagne kept me on the edge of my seat throughout the book. I surely did not see the final twist! Well done Pam!"-5 Hearts, Linda Bass, The Romance Studio

"*Ribbon Of Rain* is a dazzling adventure that explores the bonds of honor, love, and justice. This edge of your seat thriller is an absolute treat to read and one that I couldn't put down until I had finished every word. Pam Champagne has created an electrifying world of danger and intrigue with compelling characters that seem to jump off the pages and lots of sexual tension. *Ribbon Of Rain* is suspense at its best and a Recommended Read."-5 Angels, Recommended Read, Tammy, Fallen Angels Reviews

Missing In Action-"Pam Champagne has done an outstanding job on this story. *Missing In Action* is a wonderful read full of adventure and finding love, all with a supernatural flare. I recommend this book for your reading pleasure."-4.5 Stars, Chantay, Euro-Reviews

Chapter One

Sara Jackson tapped her fingers on the steering wheel, but not in time to Elvis wailing on the radio about having a blue Christmas. The hilly curves on the dark country road gave her the jitters. Or was it the six cups of coffee sloshing around in her stomach that had her nerves wired so that they were ready to short circuit? A dismal thought sparked her brain. Surely she hadn't turned into a city girl? Even the staunchest warrior would be nervous if they'd been in her shoes for the last month.

She regretted not calling her parents. Surprises so often backfired. Too late to worry about it now. The farm sat at the top of the next hill.

She crested the rise and turned into the driveway, surprised no lights blazed in the windows. Perhaps they'd gone to a church social. She inched the car closer and parked in front of one of the automatic garage doors. She shut off the engine, plunging herself into total darkness. Squash the church social idea. Her parents always left the outside porch light on if they went out for the evening.

Before her eyes adjusted to the blackness, up over the hill crept two huge yellow eyes. Sara ducked on the front seat as the headlights flashed across the yard. The toasty-warm leather seats stuck to her cheek. She'd checked her mirror every few minutes and hadn't seen a car for the last ten miles. Where had this one come from?

She butted her forehead against the leather. *Cut it out. You're spooking yourself.* She rolled onto her back and watched the fluorescent dash clock blink. Nine o'clock. She gathered her bags of presents, along with her duffle bag, opened the door and slid into the cold. A giggle

bubbled from her throat when she locked the car door. No need for that in the Vermont countryside.

She struggled up the porch stairs, juggling her bags, and pried open the screen door with her foot. Once she inserted the key, the door popped open an inch, and she used her knee, then finagled her hip until she was inside.

She flipped on the living room light and made her way across the Berber rug to put her gifts under the Christmas tree. An eerie sight froze her in place. No Christmas tree? The bags of presents slipped from her hands and tumbled to the floor. Sara backed to the nearest chair, sank onto the cushions and closed her eyes.

A strong foreboding settled in her heart. Ever since she could remember there'd been a gorgeous tree in front of the bay windows: a six-foot tree shimmering with thirty years of collected decorations and hundreds of blinking white lights. It was a family tradition.

Grow up, Sara. Life hasn't gone your way so you run home, and now your nose is out of joint because things aren't the way you expected.

Had something happened to her brother? Ethan worked for the CIA, and the last she'd heard he was in the Middle East. His exact location remained top secret.

A sharp pain started in the back of her head. One by one, she yanked out the pins securing her French twist. Heavy hair tumbled down her back. Why the hell didn't she get it chopped off? Christmas signaled the end of the year. Out with the old, in with the new. The idea took root. She'd have her hair cut while on vacation and return to New York with a new hairstyle to go along with her new attitude.

A new attitude minus useless worrying. If she didn't reduce her anxiety level, she'd end up on blood pressure medication. No way in hell would she let that bozo in New York push her into needing drugs at twenty-eight years old.

Three days until Christmas. Tomorrow, she'd coerce her father to cut down a tree. They'd have a fun day out in

the woods until they found the right one. Tomorrow night, they'd decorate the fragrant balsam fir and sip hot chocolate. Just like the old days. There may not be peace on earth, but there'd be peace in her heart, and she'd be with two of the three people she loved most.

Sara sprang to her feet and tossed her winter coat over the back of the overstuffed chair. Wouldn't life be good if she could shed her anxiety as easily as the wool coat? She kicked off her boots, grabbed the duffle bag and skipped across the room towards the stairs. It'd be great to sleep in her old bed, cuddle into soft flannel sheets and hunker under the down comforter.

Stopping at her parents' bedroom, she raised her hand to knock and then changed her mind. They had to be exhausted to go to bed this early. She'd get up before dawn and make breakfast. Surprise them with a big meal. Eggs, pancakes and bacon.

She continued down the hall to the bathroom to brush her teeth and wash her face. She stuck out her tongue at the reflection in the mirror. With her hair loose, she didn't look old enough to sit in a bar. Damn the freckles across her nose.

She slung the strap of her duffel bag over her shoulder and headed to her room. She paused at her partially opened bedroom door. Her mother was a stickler for keeping doors closed. Something about dust. Sara shook off her anxieties, pushed the door open, walked across the room and flopped face first on the bed. A scream loud enough to wake the McFinneys who lived three miles up the road tore from her throat.

Chapter Two

Jeb Hawkins bolted upright. Half-asleep, he latched on to the attacker's arm and twisted the person beneath his body. Whoa! Soft curves here. What the hell? Holding the screaming woman, he reached over and turned on the bedside lamp and lost himself in the dark depths of her big blue eyes. Reminded him of a puppy he'd once had. Pansy eyes. Right now they spit fire.

She twisted and turned. "Take your hands off me. What have you done with my parents? Who are you? Why are you sleeping in my bed?"

"I tried the other two, but they were too soft. This one is just right," he growled against her neck.

She stilled. Her heart hammered against his forearm. He'd never seen such thick long hair, except maybe in a shampoo commercial. He caved to his desire and buried his nose in its fullness. "Don't you remember me? I'm a friend of Ethan's. Name's Jeb Hawkins. Your father gave me permission to spend Christmas here." He released her before he did something rash—like kiss her senseless. Sara had been dazzling at sixteen. At twenty-eight she took his breath away.

She scuttled to the bottom of the bed. "Where are my parents?"

"Gone to Hawaii for Christmas. They didn't tell you?"

Her mouth dropped open. "Hawaii?"

He chuckled. "You say 'Hawaii' like it's Mars or Siberia. They decided that Christmas wouldn't be the same without the family. You said you weren't coming home, and Ethan's on the other side of the world. They

decided to get away.”

She sniffed.

Great, woken out a deep sleep to cope with a weepy woman. He was allergic to women’s tears. Practically broke out in a rash. “Hey, you should be happy. They deserve a vacation.”

Another sniff. “I am. It’s just that...” Her head snapped up. “You’re still friends with Ethan?”

“Yeah. Believe it or not, I was overseas on a business trip and ran into him. He asked me to stop by to check on the parents if I came home for Christmas. I had no special plans, and your parents didn’t want to leave the house empty.” Lying came as easy as sleeping.

Her eyes narrowed with suspicion. “Ethan never mentions you.”

Jeb chuckled. “Think he tells you everything that goes on in his life?”

She covered her mouth to stifle a yawn. “No, I suppose not. What kind of business trip?”

More lies. “I’m an engineering consultant. Hydropower.”

Another yawn. “You’ll have to sleep in the guestroom across the hall.”

Something more than fatigue showed in Sara’s face. Something akin to pain. Not physical, but emotional. What brought her home when she’d told her parents she’d made plans to spend the holidays with her boyfriend in New York? *Stay out of it. It’s none of your business.* “Will do. Unless you want another shock, you’d best turn your back. I sleep in the buff.”

He smiled at the flush that spread across her cheeks. She slid off the bed and walked to the window. God knew what she could see in the dark. Jeb yanked his jeans off the bedpost and pulled them on. “Okay, I’m...” He grinned, then threw back his head and laughed. She’d been watching his reflection in the window. “How do I rate on a scale from one to ten?”

Her shoulders tensed. “What?”

"The bed's all yours." He winked at her over his shoulder as he walked out.

Sara crawled beneath the covers. "Jerk," she muttered. The bed was still warm from his body, and the scent of a woody aftershave permeated the pillow. The smell of the forest after a spring thunderstorm.

Damn him for noticing that she'd watched his reflection in the window. Her lips twitched a few times. She let loose and laughed. How would she rate him? Definitely a ten. All six feet of him. Brown hair cut military style. Gorgeous eyes with eyelashes she'd kill for. Firm abs, tight buns. Well-formed rugged arms, yet not muscle-bound. Oh, yes, Jeb Hawkins was one hunk. Any woman with half a brain would steer way wide of those teasing hazel eyes.

She'd been a sophomore the year he graduated. The girls flocked around him like a bunch of hens fighting over a rooster. She'd had a crush on him the entire year. Now she'd been in his arms. The image of his naked body was imprinted in her memory. Indulging in a few fantasies involving herself and Jeb, she drifted off to sleep.

Sara.

Jeb lay in bed and tasted the name on his tongue. Dan told the truth when he bragged his daughter was pretty. The pictures he'd seen around the house didn't do her justice. Too bad she was taken.

Dan had confided that he wasn't thrilled with Sara's choice of a man. Then again, how many fathers approved of the man who stole their daughters out of the nest?

The pain in Sara's eyes puzzled him. A fight with the boyfriend? Job not going well? She worked for a top-notch publishing firm in New York City. Perhaps one of her authors had broken a hand or wrist. Maybe she'd been fired. Anything was possible in the world of publishing.

He tossed and turned on the too-hard mattress. Should he leave now that Sara had arrived? The idea held zero appeal. He'd promised Ethan he'd take care of Dan's

computer problems. Working around Sara's presence posed a challenge.

Drowsiness stole over him, and he floated, enjoying the sensations.

The shrill peal of the telephone jerked Sara from a hot sexual dream. She knocked the phone on the floor, then fumbled to locate the receiver. Groggy, she managed a "hello." The silence on the other end annoyed her. "Pervert," she muttered and started to hang up.

"You can't run away from me, Sara. I'm coming to see you. Christmas is a perfect time to tell your parents we plan to marry soon."

That voice woke her up faster than a shot of espresso. "Will? What part of 'we're finished' don't you understand?"

"No, sweet Sara, we're not. I'm sorry I lost my temper." The soothing tone of his voice raised the hairs on her neck. Was he serious? He'd put a man in the hospital for laughing with her. "I'll be there soon. Good night."

She huddled in the bed. Her parents had warned her that Will was psychologically unstable. Why hadn't she listened? She had to get out of here. Go someplace where he'd never find her. First thing tomorrow she'd call the office, although she hated dredging up her humiliation all over again.

She rolled off the bed, feet in motion before they hit the floor. She pulled some clothes out of the drawers and added them to those already in her overnight bag. She'd get in her car and drive, her goal to keep the creep away from her parents' home.

Why hadn't she stayed in New York and taken out a restraining order? A hand curved around her arm. Without thought, she braced her body and flipped the intruder on his back. How had Will managed to get in the house? She whirled around and clapped a hand over her mouth. "Oh. I'm sorry."

Jeb lay on the floor. His eyes shot daggers.

Chapter Three

Sara bit her tongue to hold back the hysterical giggle tickling the back of her throat. "I thought you were someone else. I'm sorry."

The finely shaped eyebrows rose. "Someone else? Am I missing something? I thought you and I were the only ones here."

Her gaze wandered over his body. At least he'd pulled on his jeans, even though they were unbuttoned and half zipped. "Ah...I..."

He grinned. "There you go again. Can't keep your eyes off me."

Sara ignored him and continued packing. "What are you doing in here?"

"I heard a thump. Thought you might have fallen out of bed."

"I'm leaving," Sara told him. "I suggest you do the same."

"Leaving? Are you crazy? It's four thirty in the morning. It's snowing."

"So what? It always snows in Vermont."

"The forecast calls for a blizzard. Over two feet of the white stuff and wind gusts in the fifty-mile-per-hour range."

Sara swallowed a lump of fear. If that were true, she shouldn't drive anywhere. With zero visibility, she'd end up in the ditch. Then again, a storm would stall Will. Unless he'd called from town. The mere thought terrified her.

"I've got to think." Sara stepped over Jeb and sank

onto the bed. He stayed on the floor, leaning on his elbow.

“What’s up, Sara? What spooked you?”

Sara studied him, weighing the pros and cons of confiding her sordid tale. Jeb had a right to know some maniac might show up here.

“We’ve got a problem.”

The brows went up again. “We do?”

She nodded and twisted the hem of her nightshirt.

“All right,” he said with a smile. “Lay it on me. I’m tough.”

“The phone rang a few minutes ago. When I...when I...”

“When you answered the phone...” Jeb reached up and squeezed her hand. “You’ll twist your nightgown to death.”

She gulped air, and the words spilled out. “Someone’s coming here.”

Now she had his attention. He held both her hands. “Who are you running from?”

“Hey.” Sara pulled away and stood. “It’s my problem, not yours.”

His eyes no longer twinkled. “You *have* looked outside?” The terseness in his tone drew her full attention.

“Doesn’t matter if there’s a typhoon brewing. We need to get out of here.”

“We’re not going anywhere until you talk to me. What’s going on?”

Sara wound her hair back into a tight bun and stuck in hairpins. “I made a mistake in New York. Got involved with a maniac.”

“The boyfriend your father didn’t like?”

Way to go, Dad. As much as she loved her father, he tended to open up about personal matters to virtual strangers. “One and the same.”

Jeb got to his feet and zipped his pants. A wave of lust zapped Sara. He looked so damn sexy in those faded jeans. The hairy chest and stubble of a beard made Jeb

Hawkins one hot man. A hot man that would burn her to cinders and throw out the ashes.

“Tell me everything.”

“What?” Busy ogling, she’d missed his question.

“Was it the boyfriend who called?”

“Will Perkins, former boyfriend.”

“Former? I understood from your father that you two were practically engaged.”

“I broke it off last week.”

“Why?”

“Why?” Her gaze swept the room, making sure she had all she needed. “What difference does it make?”

Jeb sidled next to her and settled an arm around her shoulders and led her to the bed. “Sit down. Talk to me. It never pays to go off half-cocked.”

Sara tried to relax, but her body was as tight as a bow ready to release its arrow.

Jeb’s hand gently rubbed her back, and she fought the temptation to lean against his warmth. “Tell me what happened.”

She fixed her gaze on the wall. “He walked into my office one afternoon. I was laughing with a coworker, Mike Rollins.”

“So?”

Sara took a deep breath. “Will grabbed Mike around the neck. Told him to take his hands off me.”

“Were his hands on you?”

She looked up then, anger about the situation returning. “No, they weren’t. But even if he was touching me, Will had no right to—”

Jeb held up his hands. “Calm down. I agree.”

“After Mike left the office, I told Will just that. I also told him I never wanted to see him again. He apologized. Said he’d overreacted. I didn’t buy it. The rage in his eyes frightened me.”

“Anything else?” Jeb prompted.

Sara shook her head, and her bun fell apart. “Go on,” he urged.

She walked to the window. The white-out conditions blocked any view. "He called me several times at home later that evening. I finally stopped answering the phone. The next day, he stormed into my office and slammed the door. I threatened to file a complaint with personnel if he didn't leave."

"And?"

"He's not stupid. He left. Mike wasn't at work that day. I asked around and discovered he'd been mugged on his way home the night before. Beat up bad enough to put him in the hospital."

"You think Perkins was responsible?"

Sara looked over her shoulder at Jeb. "I know he was. He bragged about it that night at my apartment."

His brows rose. "You let him into your apartment?"

"No, of course not. I had to work late. I got home around eight o'clock, and he was there...sitting in my living room with the lights off, waiting for me."

A cold, furious look crossed Jeb's face. "Did he hurt you?" he ground out.

Sara laughed. "He charged at me and ended up on the floor—flat on his back, the same way you did."

His facial muscles relaxed. "Then he left?"

"Hell, no. I had to call security to have him thrown out. Next day I paid a visit to the CEO at work and told them everything. Will was fired on the spot." She sighed. "I think that's why he's after me now."

"The loss of his job may have sharpened the edges, but the knife sounded ready to plunge anyway."

Sara kicked her duffle bag. "Damn it. How could I have been so stupid? Why didn't I see what kind of man he was?"

Jeb pulled her onto the bed beside him. "Don't blame yourself. That's what the asshole wants."

"What should I do?"

"We're staying right here. I'll call the local police department—explain the situation. I'm not sure what they can do in this storm, but at least it's a start."

The phone jangled, and Sara's heart kicked into a faster gear.

Jeb reached for it.

"No!" Sara covered his hand before he picked up the receiver. "Will can't know you're here."

"Bullshit." He grabbed it from the cradle.

Sara stomped on his foot. The phone dropped to the floor. She hoped he'd understand. "Hello?"

A familiar male voice bellowed through the receiver. "Sara? Is that you?"

"Hi, Dad."

"What in tarnation are you doing home?"

"I decided to come for Christmas, after all. Why didn't you tell me you and Mom were going on vacation?"

"Vacation? We were thrown out of the house by the blasted CIA."

Sara's gaze flew to Jeb. "CIA?"

"Yes. Seems I somehow got involved with an unsavory character online. My computer went berserk—like it had a mind of its own. I mentioned it to Ethan, and he suggested Jeb stay at the house and go over my computer with a fine-tooth comb. Is he about done? Your mother and I want to come home."

Sara looked at Jeb with a saccharin smile. "There's no CIA here, Dad. Just an engineer friend of Ethan's, house-sitting for you and Mom."

Raucous laughter deafened her ear. "Is that the story Jeb fed you? You believed him? Shame on you. You're too damn gullible."

Sara bristled. "Look who's talking. People your age should know better than to make friends online."

"Yeah, that's why I'm sitting on a damn beach in Hawaii when I should be home sitting in front of my fireplace. Now we're missing an opportunity to spend time with you."

"I'll be here when you get back. I quit my job."

"What?" Sara held the phone away from her ear. "You love your job."

“I’ll tell you about it when you get home. Here’s Jeb.” Sara tossed the phone at the lying son-of-a-bitch sitting next to her with a sheepish grin on his face. “My father wants to talk to you. Engineer, my ass.” She rose and walked out of the bedroom.

Chapter Four

Jeb hung up the phone and rested his head on the pillow. What a pisspoor turn of events. He should have been upfront with Sara. Did he think she'd run out of the house, screaming that the CIA had taken over her parents' home? Now Dan was determined to return days before the agreed-upon date.

Today, he'd rig the computer to trace the hackers. Since he'd been here, no one had tried to contact Dan, either by phone or e-mail.

Sara. Jeb jerked upright. Where was she? He jumped off the bed, scrambled to the hall and jogged down the stairs. He entered the kitchen and skidded to an abrupt stop. Sara stood in front of the stove, flipping pancakes. Her beautiful hair spilled down her back.

She glanced over her shoulder. "Hungry?"

"Is it laced with arsenic?"

She grinned. An evil grin that didn't put him at ease. "Hey, I'm sorry I lied. You had the right to know the truth. I just followed standard operating procedure."

"What's standard operation procedure? Lying to anyone you come in contact with?"

"Yeah, pretty much," he admitted.

"Well, I've got more important things to worry about." She flipped those pancakes like a professional. He had high regard for anyone who could cook worth a damn.

"Let me guess. The ex-boyfriend?"

Sara shut off the burner and set the platter of pancakes on the table. "Dig in. Butter and syrup are in the refrigerator." She poured fresh coffee and pulled out a

chair. "Jeb, you've got to believe me. Will's dangerous. You didn't see what he did to Mike Rollins."

"I believe you," he said with a mouthful of pancakes. "Marry me, Sara. These are delicious."

She slammed her mug on the table.

"So the guy's a nut job and is headed here as we speak. If he shows up, I'll arrest him."

Sara rose and paced the black-and-white-tiled kitchen floor. A few wisps of her long hair curled against the side of her neck. She wore her nightshirt over a pair of jeans. His gaze skimmed her body and lingered on her feet. Like him, she was barefoot. Bright sexy red toenails. God, he loved painted toenails.

The agitation in her voice interrupted his thoughts about kissing each one of them. "Are you listening to me?"

"Sorry," he mumbled and avoided her eyes.

"Can't you do a search on Will? I'm betting he's some kind of big-time criminal. Or wanted for wife abuse or even murder."

He set his fork on the table. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Damn right, I am."

"Okay. Let me boot up my laptop, and I'll see what I can find. Of course, if he's used any aliases, it will take a while."

"I have his date of birth and social security number."

"Wow. I'm impressed. Did you pick his wallet?"

"Of course not. I looked in the personnel files one night after everyone had left."

Jeb smiled. "A regular Mata Hari."

He stopped at the window on his way to the den. The snow fell at a rapid clip. It would definitely be a white Christmas. "Hey, since we're both going to be here for Christmas, let's go get a tree."

Joy flashed across her face before her eyes turned somber. "It's not safe to gallivant in the woods with Will on the loose."

Jeb waved a hand at the window. "You honestly

believe he'd risk his life in this storm?"

She nodded. "He's a man on a mission. He'll be here. I just don't know when."

He reached across the table and ran his finger down her cheek. "I'll get on the laptop while you do the dishes."

"Men," Sara muttered, cleaning up the table.

Anxiety niggled his mind. The Sara he remembered had never been one to worry needlessly. He frowned as he watched her wash the dishes. She was convinced that this Will would show up. With a sigh, he picked up his mug and headed for the den.

Jeb sat behind the desk and leaned back in his chair. Yesterday his life had been relatively simple. In return for a quiet place to spend Christmas, he'd help his friend's dad out of a potentially sticky situation. Now the man was coming home early. Sara, whom he'd had the hots for since she was sixteen, showed up, fleeing a crazy ex-boyfriend.

Nobody would touch a hair on her head during his watch. She riled his lust more than any woman he could remember. If Ethan weren't his friend, he'd have made a move on her back in high school. Even now, the thought of making love to his best friend's sister made him squirm in his chair. Didn't seem right.

"Are you daydreaming? I thought you were researching Will."

Jeb's gaze skimmed her body. Beautiful auburn hair, a heart-shaped face with freckles sprinkled across her nose. Big blue eyes. Her body was by no means voluptuous, although she did have the cutest rear. "Remember the last football game of my senior year?"

Sara snickered. "You missed a pass in the end zone, and we lost the game by three points. You weren't anyone's hero that day. Ethan ranted all through supper that night. He couldn't believe it."

Jeb swung his feet onto the desk and settled in his chair. "It was your fault I didn't catch the ball."

Sara's jaw dropped. "Right. This I've got to hear."

“You were in the middle of one of those cheers where you bend way over. The wind blew up that short skirt and gave me a damn good look at your cute little butt.”

Sara looked stunned. “You’re kidding me, right? You were eyeballing my ass instead of concentrating on catching a winning touchdown pass?”

“Didn’t you ever fantasize about me in high school?”

“The only reason you didn’t add a notch on your belt for me was because of Ethan.”

“You got that right.”

“You’re like a hot fudge sundae dripping with chocolate sauce. Women know you’re bad, yet they can’t resist you.”

Jeb grinned. “You didn’t answer my question.”

Sara hoisted herself on the desk and leaned forward. “Hate to disappoint you. Any fantasies I had back then were on the mild side. You and I walking by the lake, holding hands. Me wearing your football sweater, your high school ring on a chain around my neck.”

He roared with laughter. “What about now? Any fantasies stirring below your navel?”

Sara’s face turned red. The bane of redheads. They couldn’t hide embarrassment. God, he loved to tease her. He had no doubts that she ached to see what was inside his jeans.

She slid off the desk. “Okay, enough play. What did you find on Will?”

“There’s an outstanding warrant out on him in New York for unpaid speeding tickets. Gives us a reason to arrest him. In 2002, his wife charged him with assault, then dropped the charges when he agreed to a divorce.” He drew his brows together. “That’s all I’ve found so far. Want me to keep digging?”

Sara huffed out a breath. “No. Maybe he’s not an ax-murderer.”

“Come here.”

Chapter Five

Sara gasped at the husky desire in his voice—the longing in his eyes. “Why?”

He held out his hand. “Do you always ask questions? Trust me.”

For long moments, she stared at his hand. Like a fly caught in a spider’s web, her struggle to resist failed. She moved around the desk to where he sat, and squeaked a protest when he drew her onto his lap.

He buried his face in her neck. “Such beautiful hair.”

“I’m getting it cut right after Christmas.”

His hands tightened on her arms. “Don’t do that.”

She drew a deep breath. “Look, Jeb. You’re here to get my father out of a jam. I’m here to escape Will. All these...these feelings aren’t important.”

He nibbled her neck. “They are to me.”

She braced her hands on the arms of the chair and tried to rise. He held her tight. “Don’t, Sara. Let me hold you.”

A yearning thrummed through her veins. He was so warm, so solid, and she wanted him. Wanted to turn in his arms and kiss him. “This is a bad idea.”

“Says who?”

“Dr. Phil. He says that rekindled flames seldom catch fire.”

His tongue circled the recesses of her ear, sending shivers down her spine. “Screw Dr. Phil. Besides, we’ve never kindled a fire. Maybe thought about it, but didn’t do it.”

A thumb brushed her nipple. His erection throbbed

under her butt. "Jeb," she protested. "Stop it."

"Can't. It's been hard since I tackled you last night."

Sara crumpled. She rotated her hips, felt a burst of pleasure when he groaned. Her mind went wild with fantasies. Jeb's tongue in her mouth. Jeb's hands on her breasts. Their bodies melding together.

She turned in his arms. Her lips captured the mouth tormenting her neck and ear.

His arms tightened, squeezing the breath from her lungs.

Danger bells rang in her head. Somehow she found the strength to push away.

In between pants, he gasped, "What's wrong?"

"It's the wrong time, Jeb. Maybe the wrong place."

When he stood, he dumped her on the floor. "I disagree, but I've never forced a lady."

Sara leaned against the desk. Fought to get her breathing under control. Jeb turned away. His hard breathing told its own story.

She reached for him. "I'm sorry."

"Don't touch me, Sara. Not now."

What's wrong with you? Sara tried to make sense of her jumbled thoughts. She and Jeb were red hot for each other, and they were adults. It's not like they were strangers. She'd been tempted to explore her feelings for him years ago. Now she had the chance. Why not take advantage of the opportunity? She stepped closer. "Jeb?"

"Hmm?"

She pulled her nightshirt over her head. "Turn around."

He heaved a sigh and turned to face her. His eyes widened as his gaze dropped to roam her breasts. "Sara?"

"My parents will be home soon. Let's take advantage of their absence."

His hands shook as they grasped her bare shoulders. "Are you sure?"

She licked her lower lip. "I am."

He scooped her into his arms and laid her on the

desk. "God, I want you, Sara. Not just this once. I'm not sure I'll ever get my fill of your sweetness."

Sara trailed a finger over his face, loving that he needed a shave. "I don't need flowery words or promises. I'm a big girl."

"Maybe I need to say them." He lowered his head and nuzzled one breast, then the other. His hands spanned her rib cage. He drew a nipple into his mouth and gently sucked.

Sara almost jumped off the desk. Would have, if not for his weight pinning her there.

He pulled back and gazed into her eyes. "Did I hurt you?"

"God, no. Don't stop."

The slam of a door hardly registered. Jeb being torn from her body dragged her from her sensual haze.

"You slut. The minute my back's turned, you find another man."

No amount of blinking made Will Perkins holding a gun pointed at Jeb go away. She bolted upright and grabbed her nightshirt to cover herself. She kept her gaze fixed on Jeb lying on the floor. "Will! Put down the gun."

His wild gaze shifted between her and Jeb. "I thought you were different, Sara. You're not. You're the same as all the others." He turned the barrel of the weapon toward her.

In her peripheral vision, she saw Jeb struggle to his feet. "Will, you're wrong. I never cheated on you. I—"

"What are you doing now? Talking? Just like you were talking to Mike Rollins?"

"You and I are through."

He stepped closer, the gun never wavering. "I'm the one who ends relationships. I wasn't through with you."

Once he got to his feet, Jeb leaned against the wall. The terror in Sara's eyes stabbed him in the gut. He wanted to kill the bastard. "You heard the lady, Perkins. She's not interested."

Perkins swung the Glock in Jeb's direction. "Who are you?"

"Agent Hawkins. CIA."

An insane laugh escaped Perkin's mouth. "Yeah, right. And I'm Jack the Ripper."

"He's telling the truth, Will," Sara interjected.

"Shut up, bitch."

Jeb's heart went into overdrive. This guy was certifiably insane. "Be quiet, Sara. I'll handle this."

Jeb sized up the older man gripping the 10mm Glock. Snow melted off his parka and pooled at his feet. It had to be difficult to maneuver in all that winter gear. When Perkin's gaze wandered back to Sara, Jeb moved forward and side-kicked the man's knee. The gun dropped from his fingers and skittered across the hardwood floor.

Chapter Six

Sara scrambled to pick up the gun. Pointed it at Perkins, who struggled to his feet. "You won't shoot me, Sara."

Jeb groaned at the bizarre twist in the situation. Huge eyes dominated Sara's face. She grasped the gun in both hands and aimed at Perkin's chest. Jeb moved slowly towards her. He kept his tone low and soft. "Sara, give me the gun."

Sara's eyes never left Perkins. His heart stopped when her hands tightened on the butt of the Glock. "Don't do it, Sara. He's not worth the price of the bullet."

Will laughed. "Told you she couldn't do it."

Christ. Did this man have a death wish? "Sara? Look at me."

She turned her head and met his eyes. Taking advantage of the opportunity, Perkins made his move. Jeb blocked the man's punch, twisted his arm behind his back and pounded his face against the desk.

"You broke my nose."

Holding Perkins on the desk with one arm, Jeb opened the desk drawer to rummage for some type of restraint. "You're lucky I didn't break your neck." He found a roll of duct tape. Perfect. No home should be without it.

Jeb safely restrained the perp, then hunkered next to Sara. She stared blankly at the wall, the weapon still in her hands. He cupped her cheek. "It's over, Sara. Let go of the gun."

Her fingers loosened, and she started to shake. Jeb

took the Glock and pulled her nightshirt over her head before drawing her close to his warmth. Closing his eyes, he kissed the top of her head. "It's all right. It's over."

Rising, he moved back to the desk and called 9-1-1. Then he sat on the floor with Sara and waited. Within thirty minutes, the cops knocked on the door.

They read Will Perkins his Miranda rights as they led him out the door. He turned and focused his eyes on Sara. "This isn't over. I'll be back."

Jeb dashed to the man's side and grabbed the front of his jacket. "A broken nose and prison time will look like small potatoes if you come near her again."

Worried about her state of mind, Jeb returned to Sara, and she gazed at him with troubled eyes. "I almost shot him."

"Come on, I'll help you upstairs. You didn't shoot him. Focus on that."

He'd seen Sara's expression on the faces of military men and women the first time they'd killed an enemy. Sara was shell-shocked at the mere thought of taking another life. He wrapped his arm around her. "Come with me. Once you're in bed, I'll bring you a cup of hot chocolate."

Jeb lead her toward the stairs, not sure how to handle her docility. In her room, he pulled back the covers on the bed. "Climb in. I'll go make the hot chocolate."

She clutched his hand. "I want tea...with lots of sugar."

He brushed the loose hair from her face and kissed her forehead. "You got it. Try to relax."

Relax? Sara was about as far away from being relaxed as she was from the North Pole. She might never relax again. Remembering the feel of the cold metal in her hands brought a shudder of fear. Something precious had been stolen from her today. She'd almost shot a man. Although taking someone's life had never entered her realm of thinking, common sense told her it would have

been self-defense.

She scooted further under the covers and tried to control the shakes. Her hands and feet felt as cold as ice. She looked at the clock. Only one o'clock in the afternoon, and so much had occurred. More than she could take in.

A memory slammed into her. She and Jeb almost had sex on her father's desk. The recollection brought a wave of heat, along with embarrassment. What had she been thinking? Obviously, she hadn't been thinking at all.

Jeb walked in, a smile on his face. "Here it is, milady. As you ordered. Earl Grey tea. I found a jar of honey. Better for you than sugar." He set the mug on the nightstand and plumped her pillows. He hooked his hands under her armpits and helped her to sit up.

She flinched from his touch and pretended not to see the hurt flash in his eyes. "Thanks, Jeb. I'm all right now. You probably want to work on my dad's computer. That's why you came here."

Jeb's eyes widened in astonishment. "Are you trying to get rid of me?"

Sara fiddled with the trim on the comforter. "I...I need to be alone. Please understand."

He glanced away. "Sure. Give a holler if you need anything."

Sara sipped her tea and cringed when he slammed the door. Not that she blamed him. She should have thanked Jeb for preventing a shooting disaster. Instead, she threw him out of her room.

Jeb stormed into the den and slammed his fist on the desk. He'd never understand women. He'd hoped he and Sara were on the same wavelength. *Wrong!* Several hours ago they'd almost had sex on her father's desk. Now she refused to look at him. Her withdrawal involved more than the horror of almost shooting Perkins. She had second thoughts about their mutual attraction.

He pushed aside all thoughts of the woman sipping tea upstairs and concentrated on Dan Jackson's computer.

Dan had received two new e-mail messages. Jeb's heart beat faster. Both were from the mystery person.

The subject line read Where Are You. *Hey, my friend. Just wondering why you haven't been online. I miss our chats.*

Jeb set the trace of the ISP in motion. Then he forwarded the e-mails to headquarters in Washington. Ethan would never divulge any information to his father through their e-mail correspondence, but certain people might not know that.

He leaned back and closed his eyes. At Sara's loud scream, he jumped out of his chair and bolted upstairs.

She sat on the edge of the bed, shaking. Jeb hurried to her side, reached out to touch her, then dropped his hand. She'd made it quite clear she didn't want him near her. "Bad dream?"

She raised her head. "Yes. A real nightmare."

Uncomfortable, Jeb shifted from foot to foot. "How about another cup of tea?"

"No, thank you."

He sighed and turned to go. "Well, call me if you need anything."

"I need you to hold me, Jeb."

He stopped in midstride, pivoted and searched her face. She'd crawled back under the covers.

"Are you sure? Not long ago you cringed at my touch."

"I know. I'm sorry. I needed time to come to terms with almost shooting Will."

He moved to the bed and sat on the edge. "And have you accepted what happened?"

She placed her hand on his thigh. "Yes. The nightmare helped."

Jeb swung his legs onto the mattress and leaned against the headboard. "Want to talk about it?"

"I pulled the trigger and put an end to Will's life."

He flipped to his side and faced her. "God, Sara. I'm sorry."

“Don’t be. In my dream, Will also had a gun. I killed him before he shot you. I understand now that if he’d come after me, or you, I would have been justified in taking his life.”

Without thinking, Jeb drew her into his arms. “Good for you. You’re a strong person, Sara.”

She snuggled closer. “The snow has stopped.”

“I noticed that.”

“Tree-hunting tomorrow?”

Jeb hugged her. “You bet. Now get some sleep.”

The warmth of her body snuggled next to him brought a sense of peace Jeb hadn’t experienced in years. At this moment, life couldn’t get much sweeter.

Chapter Seven

Sara rolled over and bumped into a warm body. Initial confusion vanished. She smiled and snaked her arm around the taut stomach muscles, cuddling spoon-style against Jeb's back. She was contemplating waking him with kisses when she heard voices downstairs.

"Jeb?" She shook his shoulder.

"Hmm?"

"Wake up. Someone's downstairs."

He slid off the bed to yank on his jeans. Not even the fact someone was in the house diminished her appreciation of his body. Was fate against them?

A knock on the bedroom door froze them both. "Sara?"

"It's my mother," Sara whispered.

Jeb rolled his eyes. "Great. Freaking wonderful."

"Sara? Is someone with you?"

Before Sara could answer, Jeb put his hand over her mouth. "Come in, Mrs. Jackson. I'm here with Sara."

Sara gaped at him in horror.

The door opened, and Sara's parents stumbled over each other to get in the room. "Look here, young man—"

"Calm down, Cora," Dan Jackson soothed his wife. Sara's a grown woman."

"It's not the way it looks, Dan."

A skeptical frown appeared on Dan's round face. "Is that right? How is it then?"

"Let's go downstairs, and we'll tell you all about it."

Dan shifted his gaze between Sara and Jeb. "While you're at it, you can explain what happened to my office."

Looks like a tornado blew through.”

Sara pointed to a large balsam fir. “That’s the one.”

Jeb looked doubtful. “How can you tell? Shake off all the snow. It might be a Charlie Brown.”

Cora and Dan snowshoed over to the tree in question.

“No Charlie Brown trees. There are too many beautiful ones,” Dan said.

Sara hid a smile behind her mitten. Her parents were troopers. After a leisurely breakfast and a long discussion about what had occurred with Will, they’d bounced back from their shock and suggested everyone put on snowshoes and head into the woods to find the perfect tree.

“Sara’s right. That’s the one,” Cora said when Jeb shook off the snow.

Dan held up his handsaw. “Okay. Everyone out of the way while I cut her down.”

Sara walked behind Jeb. As he moved under a branch laden with snow, she yanked on it. Snow tumbled on his head. She shivered with the thought of snow sliding under his collar and down his back.

Jeb shook it off. “Why you...”

She held up her hands in surrender. “Truce.”

He charged and knocked her face first to the ground. “Truce, my ass. How do you like it?”

Laughing and sputtering, Sara rolled to her back. The sun blinded her eyes, making Jeb appear out of focus. She was taken by surprise when his mouth captured hers in a long soul-searching kiss.

He lifted his head and gazed into her eyes. “I’ve fallen in love with you, Sara.”

Her heart thumped. “We barely know each other.”

“That’s not true. I’ve known you forever. We took different paths, but we’re the lucky ones. Our trails have crossed again.”

Her father’s voice boomed in the quiet morning. “Hey, Hawkins. You gonna help me drag this tree or spend the

rest of the day rolling in the snow with my daughter?"

Sara scrutinized the tree from ten feet away while sipping hot cider. "An inch to the right."

Jeb sighed and rearranged the star on top of the tree.

Dan laughed from his recliner. "Better get used to it, Jeb. That is if you plan on marrying my daughter."

Sara's face heated to a burn. "Dad!"

"Ignore him," Cora said, looking up from the afghan she knitted. "You know how he likes to tease."

Jeb climbed down from the stepladder. "Everyone happy?"

"I am." The tree was prettier than any she remembered from past years. She wondered if it had something to do with Jeb. He'd fallen in love with her. Since that incident in the snow, they hadn't been alone. Jeb had gone home to his parents that very night and just returned about three hours ago. He planned to spend Christmas Eve and Christmas here.

"Got some news on your computer friend, Dan."

Dan sat forward in his chair. "Well? Don't keep me in suspense."

"Traced the ISP to the Middle East. We've dealt with these situations before. A terrorist cell more than likely is waiting for Ethan to e-mail you some information they can use."

Dan scoffed. "They must be stupid to think that. Ethan's top-notch."

"They don't know that, Dad," Sara said.

"Anyway, that's not the only thing they hoped to accomplish. They've pirated your computer so they can use it to communicate with other cells."

"Why those sons-of—"

Sara bit back a grin when her mother hit him with her knitting needles. "Watch your language."

"Bottom line, Dan," Jeb continued, "I have to confiscate your computer, send it to Washington."

Dan grumbled. "I'll get a new one."

Cora disagreed. "I don't think so. You can't stay out of trouble."

Sara leaned against the couch cushions, holding Jeb's hand. She'd never been more content.

Dan asked, "Sure your parents don't mind you spending Christmas with us, Jeb?"

Jeb chuckled. "Not at all. Our family's huge. No one even notices when a few are missing." He picked up his mug of cider and settled on the couch beside Sara. "I'd like to give you your present tonight. That is, if there's no tradition to open gifts on Christmas morning."

"Dan and I will open ours early tomorrow morning. You and Sara do what you like."

Sara sensed Jeb was anxious to exchange gifts. Why hadn't she put more thought into her gift for him? "Let's open them tonight."

Jeb reached into his pocket and handed Sara a wrapped present in the shape of a small box. Her gaze flew to his face. It was a ring box. She knew it. "Jeb?"

His thumb rubbed across her bottom lip. "Open it."

With trembling fingers, she tore the paper and sat in silence, holding the small black velvet box.

"Well," her father prompted. "You gonna open it or stare at it all night?"

The box almost fell from her hands as she pushed the top open. A brilliant blue diamond sparkled up at her.

Cora rose, her knitting project forgotten. She hurried over to admire the ring. "It's beautiful, Sara. I've never seen a more perfect blue diamond."

Jeb squeezed Sara's hands. "I chose a blue diamond because it reminded me of your eyes. Will you marry me?"

A huge lump in Sara's throat prevented her from speaking. She opened her mouth, gave up and closed it.

"Sara?"

The worry in Jeb's voice spurred her to action. She wound her arms around his neck. "Are you sure, Jeb?"

"I've never been surer of anything in my life."

"I love you."

“Is that a yes?”

Laughter bubbled from her throat. “Yes, yes, yes.” Jeb picked up her hand and slipped the ring on her finger.

“Congratulations, Sara. This time you made a wise choice.”

Not even her father’s comment robbed her of the joy that filled her heart. Then she remembered. “Oh, Jeb. My present pales in comparison.”

“I’ll love anything you give me.”

Dan laughed. “That’ll change after a few years.”

Cora turned her wrath on her husband. “Be quiet, Daniel.”

Sara rose and pulled an envelope tied with a red ribbon from under the tree.

Jeb slit open the flap and removed the contents. Sara watched closely for his reaction. When he threw back his head and laughed, she let out a sigh of relief.

“What is it?” Dan asked.

“Two gift certificates for ice-cream sundaes, loaded with chocolate sauce, and a handwritten personal promise that Sara won’t cut her hair any time soon.”

“I don’t understand. Must be an inside joke,” Dan mumbled.

Cora piped in. “You’re a nosy old man. You don’t have to know everything.”

All Sara wanted was to be alone in bed with her husband-to-be. “Jeb and I are turning in now.”

“What?” her father yelled. “It’s not even nine o’clock. I thought we could play a game of hearts. Ouch!” He squealed when Cora poked him with her needles.

Sara slid off the couch and held out her hand to Jeb. “Ready?” Hand in hand they walked towards the stairs. “Goodnight. See you in the morning,” she called to her parents over her shoulder.

Thinking about the pleasures she’d experience in Jeb’s arms made her stumble. Jeb caught her around the waist and jogged to the bedroom with her under his arm. “I love you, Sara. I didn’t know what love was until you

Pam Champagne

jumped on me in bed.”

“I didn’t jump—” Jeb tossed her on the bed and caught the rest of her words in his mouth.

Tomorrow, she’d set him straight.