



The Right Christmas

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Chapter One

She tapped her foot impatiently while her boss looked down at the file in front of him. It was a lucky thing he couldn't see the annoyed action behind the desk. She kept her pleasant and a smile firmly fixed in place. She and Mr. Snitz did not have the best working relationship. He knew she hated being in Charming, Alaska instead of New York and played it against her every chance he could. He also knew she was the best researcher of new perfumes at Aphrodite's Luxury Perfumes. She had her finger on the pulse of the market, so her job was secure. They played the game of open dislike, and it was probably her only enjoyment in Anchorage to watch him squirm.

Charming was a Podunk little island in Alaska that for some reason Aphrodite's perfumes had put their main lab. She soon found out why. She could pull some of the most exotic scents from the wild flowers there, and her new scent was the product of such amazing infusions. They owned most of the land around the compound so she was able to roam at will in the spring and the summer and even the fall. But the winters were harsh, and storms were fierce along the coast. So she spent that time in the lab working on new perfumes and missing New York in the worst way.

One whole year in this place with deathly cold in the winter, compared to Alaska, New York was Hawaii when the cold snap came in. The position that opened up was one she could not refuse. More money, more access to rare fragrances to blend, the only down side was the venue. She gave a huge sigh, and Mr. Charles Snitz with his bad toupee looked up at her with a raised eyebrow. Her first week there he hit on her thinking she would need his brand of comfort to keep her warm in the long winter months. When she shut him down cold, their war of words and dominance began. He pushed, and she pushed right back. He was scared that she would take his job. *He has every right to be. That's where're I'm heading*, she thought and gave him an innocent look.

"Am I keeping you from something, Ms. Huette?" he asked.

"Life in general, Charles. Why did you call me in here?" Zariya replied.

"You have a mouth on you that is unlikeable," he snapped.

“You like my mouth just fine, and I refused the offer, hence your attitude now,” Zariya shot back and was distinctly pleased when he flushed red.

“One of these days your impudence will get you fired, and I relish seeing that.” Mr. Snitz smiled nastily.

Her face was bland. “Your wife will probably find out about you chasing skirts all over Anchorage, and I relish seeing her snap you up by the balls. Now why am I in your office?”

Zariya had met his wife at the last Christmas party. She was a formidable woman who was a few sizes bigger than her husband. She knew his type; he wanted to exude control over the people he worked with because he had none at home. She was relegated to spending her holidays in Alaska. She certainly didn’t have to wait on his say so like some kind of entry level employee. His next words brightened her mood considerably.

“The head office wants you back in New York for their holiday push of the new scent you created. Chosen seems to be the next big thing, and they want you at all the big retailers for each debut of the line.” She could hear the distaste in his voice at her success. “Hopefully, they will keep you there.”

She had to hold herself back from squealing in pleasure. “Oh you would love that, wouldn’t you, Charles? You can’t bring me down, baby. I’m heading home for Christmas.”

He handed her the envelope that held her plane ticket without a comment. “The small plane will take you to the main airport in Anchorage, and from there you can be on your way to precious New York.” He looked back down at the file on his desk and mumbled. “While I have a few weeks of peace.”

“Merry Christmas, Charles. Enjoy the snow and, well, more snow.” She stepped out of his office and danced down the hall to hers. It was after four and the skies were already going dark. She was heading home to pack and be on a flight first thing in the morning heading away from Alaska.

Her house was a little cottage on the outskirts of the compound that the company owned. It was ten minutes away from the main building, but in snow it was a long ten minutes. When she stepped outside to her car, there was already three feet of snow on the ground. Her snow chains on the big

SUV slipped for a minute before gaining traction, and she set off for home. There were only like three hundred residences on Charming Island. Most of them were the families of the people who worked for the company. She couldn't fault them for the security of buying their own island. Corporate warfare was fierce in the perfume market. But sometimes it got so lonely she could almost scream. That's why she was so thrilled to be going back to subways, shopping crowds, and yes, New Years in Time Square.

Parties with my friends and dancing the night away! She slammed the door to her vehicle and went up the snow-filled walk way to her front door. She looked up to the sky with the clouds that were heavy with moisture. "Okay clouds gimme clear skies tomorrow," she pleaded. She wanted out of Charming for at least a little while. Forgoing heading to the kitchen for dinner she built a fire up in the fire place to help warm the house before dragging out her suitcase. She looked at the size and changed her mind. She would take an overnight bag and blow some cash on a new wardrobe. After a year away from civilization and having to shop online then having to wait for a postal plane to get in or going to Anchorage just for a Wal-Mart, she deserved a new set of clothes. Nothing could bring down her high at this point. She was heading home.

By the next day she was standing on the chilly airstrip looking at the small plane that didn't look like it could stand up against the buffeting wind and snow. Even though she wanted to make it to the Big Apple, she wondered about the safety of the plane and the man called Captain Joey flying it. He smelled suspiciously like peppermint ripple.

"Are you sure we should be going up in this thing?" Zariya asked as she got on board before him.

"This is the best it's going to get, lil' lady," Captain Joey replied. "It's now or never. I'll be staying in Anchorage for the next few weeks. Charming will be cut off because of the snow."

His words cinched her decision. There was no way she was going to spend Christmas alone in Charming like she did last year.

The aircraft took off shuddering in the wind, and soon rose into the sky. Each shake made Zariya nervous, and she pulled her seat belt just a bit

tighter. Captain Joe laughed, and she wondered who the hell the company hired to fly their employees around. Finally the shuddering stopped, and she breathed a sigh of relief. When she thought the bad weather had passed, there was a loud sound, and the plane began to shudder violently.

“What the hell is going on?” she cried out.

“Um, we seem to be losing altitude,” Captain Joe yelled over the noise.

“Seem to be”? What kind of pilot are you!”

“Don’t worry, sweetheart. I’m gonna land this baby nice and smooth.” He laughed loudly. “Hold on!”

“I’m going to kill you when we get on the ground!” she screamed back and braced herself, praying all the way.

The plane hit the snow-covered ground, and it still jarred her teeth. When they got out, she slapped him. She felt around her entire body to make sure nothing hurt before she took a swing at Captain Joe. Luckily he ducked.

“You are insane, a drunk insane fool. Look we’re in the middle of nowhere!” She swung at him again, and he dodged her again.

“I know exactly where we are, and if you would just sit in the plane, I’ll go get us some help. Stop trying to hit me, lady!”

“Stop moving so I can get one good punch in!” She fumed. “I’m supposed to be getting a plane heading to Anchorage. Instead I’m in the wilderness with a peppermint patty!”

“Lady, let me get my bag, and I’ll hike to the closest ranger station. By evening we’ll have you in Anchorage, and you never have to see me again,” Captain Joey soothed.

Zariya narrowed her eyes at the old man. “We had better be, or I’m going to hunt you down.”

He nodded and actually looked afraid. “You sit in the plane and keep warm. I’ll go get help. I’ll only be gone a few hours.”

Zariya got back into the cockpit, and he took his bag out before closing the door.

“Only a few hours, lady. I promise,” Captain Joey said.

“Okay,” Zariya replied. She let the first feeling of fear filter in. “Don’t leave me here by myself too long. I’m sorry I tried to hit you.”

He grinned. "Don't worry. I like my women feisty."

His words made her smile as the old man closed the door and pulled the hood of his parker over his head. He had only gone a few feet before the snow and the wind swallowed him up and she couldn't see him anymore. She looked at her watch. It was only ten in the morning. *He has a lot of time to get back to me before it gets dark*, she thought and looked around. She pulled a book from her small bag. It was going to keep her company while she flew home. But now it was going to keep her sane while she waited to be rescued.

She was halfway through the book when she looked at her watch and saw it was after three, and the sun was heading across the sky. In Alaska when it got dark, it got *dark*. She looked around in the cock pit and found a flashlight in case she needed it before the rescuers arrived. The snow outside began to get thicker, and she had to open the door more than once to keep it from piling too high around the airplane. By six she was freezing. The warmth in the cockpit was long gone, and so was the light. *That's what I get for trusting that old geezer*, she thought angrily. She would have to rescue herself.

Zariya sat in the pilot's chair and pushed the door with her feet to get it open. She pulled her scarf out of her bag and wrapped it around her nose and mouth to keep the air warm as she inhaled. She took her overnight bag with her and began to trudge through the snow with the flashlight. It was a full moon which helped illuminate against the white flakes on the ground. She would walk until she came to a house or cabin. It couldn't be that far. They were not in the air for more than forty-five minutes before the plane went down.

She could not be more wrong because after two hours of walking and the temperature dropping even further, she wondered if she should have stayed with the plane. There she would have frozen to death, so no matter how tired she was and how much she wanted to sit down and rest for a minute, she kept moving. She watched on some documentary about being stuck in the wilds of Alaska if you started to overheat, your body was lying. You were actually suffering the first stages of hypothermia.

“Don’t take off your coat, gloves, or hat. Don’t stop to rest. Don’t fall asleep.” She kept repeating the words through frozen lips, and she trudged deeper into nowhere.

She finally saw a light and hoped that it wasn’t some kind of hallucination as she moved toward it. But Zariya kept her eyes fixed on the glimmer of hope in the middle of a snow storm. It felt like hours more before her feet touched wood, and she tripped onto to a wooden surface. She was barely able to get to her knees and crawled to the front door to hit it weakly with her hands.

“Help,” she said and knew her voice was too faint. She would have to make more noise, or the people inside would find her frozen on their doorstep the next time they opened the door. Zariya used the last of her strength to lie flat on the patio and kick the door with all her might. She raised her voice and screamed help as hard as she could over and over again. A dog bark from the inside, and then the door opened and light flooded out.

“What the fuck!” A man’s voice, and then she was hauled up roughly and lifted inside.

“Shit, you’re frozen through.”

It was a gravelly voice, she thought vaguely, and her body began to shiver. This man laid her in front of a fireplace, and the heat made her whimper weakly in pleasure. “Don’t move, honey. I’ll get you warm.” The voice held concern, and she felt strong hands strip her of her cold wet clothing. Her shoes came off, and he put her feet close to the fire, rubbing them vigorously and making her cry out in pain.

“I know, I know, but if I don’t get your blood circulating, you’re going to lose these toes,” he explained as he worked feverishly. “Now I’m going to take your clothes off. Don’t worry. It’s purely to get you warm.”

She was in no shape to argue. She laid there while he undressed her and rubbed her skin. As she felt heat slip back into her bones, the tremors in her body increased. The man moved away and came back with blankets, wrapping her tight. He lifted her against her shoulder and held a glass to her lips.

“Drink this. It will warm you up from the inside,” he encouraged.

She opened still numb lips and let the liquid into her mouth. It burned going down, and the taste was strong. She began to cough, but she could feel what went down warming her stomach.

“That’s okay. It’s a twelve year old brandy.” He chuckled. “How the hell did you get out there in the middle of this?”

“Plane crash,” she explained weakly. “Pilot left me, didn’t come back.”

“Are you serious? There’s someone else out there!” he said.

“Captain Joey.”

“Who let you on a plane with that drunken old fool?” he exclaimed, rubbing her shoulders through the material of the blanket.

“So tired,” she whispered. Her eyelids were heavy from the exertion of the day and all she went through. “Can I just go to sleep?”

“Did you fall and hit your head? Does anything hurt?”

She felt his hands pull the scrunchy from her hair, and strong but gentle fingers probed her scalp. Why did he keep asking her all these questions when all she wanted to do was curl up by the fire and sleep? “No,” Zariya answered.

“Then you can sleep. Don’t feel any bumps, but if I don’t see you up in a few hours, I’ll wake you,” the deep masculine voice said gently. He lifted her easily, and when he laid her back down, she felt softness beneath her body.

A cold nose pressed on her cheek before a rough tongue licked her face. The big mass lay next to her, and she felt warmer still.

“Leave her alone, Nico.”

She felt the fur being pulled away, and the cold returned. She moaned. “No, give it back.”

A chuckle and then she felt the mass of fur settle next to her again. “I guess he can keep you warm.”

She let sleep take her as warmth began to take the chill away, and she knew she was safe from the storm outside.

Chapter Two

Patrick looked down at the woman sleeping in front of the fire. He couldn't believe she made it to his door. It had to be luck or sheer willpower on her part. The terrain around his house was certainly not the greatest. She was lucky she didn't fall and crack her skull on the sharp outcroppings of rocks that were buried under the snow. While she slept he got into his snow gear and went looking for where Captain Joey had crashed his plane. He couldn't believe that someone hired that old drunk to take this woman to Anchorage. He wouldn't trust the man to pilot anything except a bottle to his lips. Patrick had no doubt the man had made his way to safety in one of the various places he lived and totally forgot about his passenger.

Anger surged through him. He had walked pretty far, and there was no sign of the crash site. He knew the snow was falling so heavily that the small plane would be covered, but he should have seen an outline of it close by. There was nothing, so she walked pretty far to find his place. Patrick made a mental note that the next time he went into Anchorage and he saw Captain Joey to have his license pulled. Not that it would make a difference. He had no doubt the old man would fly without one and make his money the illegal way.

He already tried the phones. There was no service which meant the storm had knocked it out. He tried the CB and got a static filled message to the Alaskan authorities. Captain Joey hadn't even called a mayday, so they didn't know he was down. Patrick advised them of the situation and let them know of her existence. The problem was the winter storm rolled in quickly, and they were not going to be able to send out rescue for a few weeks.

He turned his attention back to the woman on his floor. She had been wearing expensive clothes that were now in his dryer. Her boots were flashy, and the price tag had to be a few hundred dollars. Her hair was straight and black, and the firelight reflected off the ebony skin of her face. The arch of her eyebrows and the manicured fingernails told him she was a woman accustomed to the finer things in life. But she was a striking beauty, with dusky rose-colored lips that were parted in sleep. Nico, his full-blooded

Husky, looked up at him with ice blue eyes for a moment before settling his head back down next to hers. She turned and wrapped her arms around the dog's gray and white fur, and Patrick grinned. He settled down in his favorite armchair close to the fire and prepared to watch her throughout the night for any signs of a concussion or injury.

"Where're my clothes!"

Patrick must have fallen asleep as the long night progressed because the next thing that woke him up was her loud shriek. He sat up in the chair, and when she saw him, she screamed again. It was not a way he wanted to wake up, and he felt his irritation rise.

"Calm down, lady. You were unconscious on my doorstep last night. You're safe," Patrick explained.

"Yeah, then where are my clothes? Did you take them off to get your jollies looking at my body?" Her eyes flashed fire as she clutched the blanket to her.

"Are you kidding me?" he asked incredulously. "Lady, you were soaked to the bone and suffering the effects of hypothermia. I stripped those clothes off you and wrapped you up to stop you from losing your feet to frostbite or even dying last night."

That seemed to make her think. "Oh, okay. Thanks then."

The tone in her voice made him grit his teeth. "You sound so appreciative. Where did you come from anyway, and why the heck were you flying with Captain Joey?"

"I live on Charming Island. I work for Aphrodite's Luxury Perfumes. I was on my way to New York, and my boss made the arrangements for me," she explained.

"I think your boss doesn't care about your welfare much to let you fly with a drunk," Patrick said.

"Charles Snitz would probably dance on my grave."

Patrick smiled. "The perfume business must be a cut throat one."

She returned his smile, and he liked it instantly. "It can be when you're the best."

"Well, Ms. Best of the perfume business, what's your name?"

“Zariya Huette and you are?”

He leaned over and extended his hand to her. “Patrick Vallen at your service, and this guy is Nico. He along with the fire kept you warm all night.”

“You are a good doggie,” she crooned. She raised warm chocolate brown eyes to him. “Thanks for saving me. So when are they coming to pick me up?”

Patrick looked at her questioningly. “When is who coming to pick you up?”

“Um, a rescue party, a snow mobile, the National Guard, someone who will get me from your house to New York City,” she said slowly.

Patrick felt the muscle in his jaw tighten with irritation with her speaking to him like he was slow on the uptake. “Sorry, sweetie, you are stuck here for the next few weeks. No one can get to you until this storm passes.”

She stood up angrily almost forgetting to take the blankets, Patrick noted. “What do you mean they can’t get to me for a few weeks?”

Patrick spoke to her with slow deliberate tones mirroring what she did a few moments earlier. “They cannot come get you until after the snow storm has subsided. You are stuck here for a few weeks.”

She narrowed her eyes into slits. “I have a series of debuts for my new perfume line all of December in New York. I am going to get to them even if I have to walk there. I’m not going to be stuck in the wilderness of Alaska with Davy Crockett and his dog. How the hell far do you like in the woods anyway?”

Davy Crockett and his dog? Patrick stood and walked toward her. Anger made his tone deadly. “Listen. Zariya is it? You can damn well walk anywhere you want because when you step out that door, I will sure as hell not be looking for you when you lose your stuck up ass in the snow. I live far into the wilderness as you say for a reason. I’ve been around prissy chicks like you, and I would actually prefer the silence than your irritating voice. But I’m a nice guy. I won’t chuck you out into the snow. So you have two choices—stay here and be safe for a few weeks, or go out there and be eaten by wolves. I don’t rightly care.”

She stepped back and mumbled, “I guess I have no choice.”

“What’s that?” Patrick cupped his hand around his ear.

“I said I’ll stay here. Thank you for having me,” she replied with saccharine sweetness.

“Good choice.” Patrick began to walk away.

“Where you going?” she asked, and he could hear the alarm in her voice.

“To the kitchen to find us something to eat.”

“Can you get me my clothes?” she asked.

He rolled his eyes and kept moving. “You seem well enough. The laundry room is that other door by the loft stairs. Go get ’em yourself.”

He let the kitchen door close behind him and leaned his hand against the polished wooden counter. He came to his hideaway for the peace and quiet. No holiday parties, no New Yorkers buzzing his penthouse asking him to come out and play. He wanted the solace of being alone in the wilderness, and instead he would have to spend the entire month with the exact thing he was trying to get away from. “Merry Christmas to me,” he muttered and opened the fridge to pull out some eggs.

He worked in silence scrambling eggs and frying up bacon. He made a pot of coffee, and while he worked he sipped the dark brew hoping it would calm him from Zariya Huette in his living room. He could hear her talking with Nico and even give a giggle. Patrick assumed the dog licked her in affection or something. *Traitor*, he thought with irritation. It was amazing she could be so nice to an animal and ungrateful to the human who saved her from certain death. He should have known from the time he saw that fur lined snow hat she had on that she was one of those uptight women who spent more on shoes than people in a third world country had in a year. Patrick vowed to spend most of his time upstairs in his loft reading, anything to keep her away from him. He loved Alaskan winters. The snow would be heavy almost every night, and the storms usually settled over the vast country for weeks, cutting him off from the world. Now the weather he loved would keep her in his sanctuary for weeks. He cursed his luck.

With breakfast prepared he went to the door and snapped, “Breakfast!”

She looked up with surprise, and he saw anger flare in her eyes. She got up smoothly from the sofa where she had put the cushions back neatly. She

walked with the grace of fine living, her nose in the air. It was then Patrick decided he was going to take her down a peg or two. Even if she thought he was no more than a mountain man, she should have been more respectful to a man who saved her life. She sat down, and he dropped a plate in front of her. A piece of egg fell onto her clothes.

He sat across from her and held up the metal coffee pot. "You want some?"

"Yes," she answered and held out her cup.

Patrick put it on the table after pouring his own. "Help yourself."

She raised an eyebrow at him but said nothing. She took the pot and poured her coffee, adding some cream and sugar and stirring it before taking a sip. She sighed in delight and began to eat ravenously. Patrick watched her for a moment before diving into his own breakfast, and they ate in silence for a few minutes.

"I went looking for the plane to get the rest of your stuff. No luck. Sorry."

"Did you find my bag that I had with me?" she asked.

"It's out there next to the sofa."

"Good. That's all I had," Zariya replied.

He looked at her. "You're telling me that's all you have? Why the hell for?"

"If you must know I was planning to splurge on a new wardrobe of clothes when I got to New York," she said primly.

Patrick gave a bark of laughter and shook his head. "Typical."

"Excuse me?"

"I said typical woman. You were thinking about shopping rather than necessity," he replied before shoveling a forkful of eggs into his mouth.

"You have a low opinion of women, Patrick," she announced. "I earned that money, and I can spend it how I choose. What do you care?"

"I don't have a low opinion of women, just people who spend money like it's water on needless things." He pointed his fork at her. "I really don't care. I'm saying that if you had common sense you would have packed something more than a few scraps of panties and some pajamas. Now look.

You're stuck here for weeks with two pairs of silk pajamas and what you have on."

"So if you had found the plane and a load of luggage it would make you feel better?" she asked. "You said you can't find the plane. So what's the difference?"

"It's the principle of the thing."

"You searched my bag," she said accusingly.

"I was looking for ID."

"Amazingly enough you didn't look in the front pocket with my wallet. You look in the part with the panties," she replied mildly and took a bite of her food.

Patrick felt his face burn. "You are going to be such a delight to have around for Christmas."

"You're a chauvinist pig who deserves a lump of coal in his stocking then to be bopped over the head with it," she said sweetly. "Thank you for breakfast."

She went back to eating delicately, and he actually found himself smiling at her comment. He scowled quickly when he felt her looking at him. If anything she had spunk, and *why the hell am I thinking about kissing her?* he wondered.

Chapter Three

Stuck, I'm stuck. Zariya felt the elation of going home to New York fizzle into the depression of having to stay in Alaska and in the middle of nowhere. She didn't even have the option of being in her home with her own stuff. She'd be in this place for weeks with only a few pairs of panties and pajamas and with *Patrick Vallen*. In her mind she said his name like it was something bad tasting, but while she looked around she could see he had impeccable taste. A leather chair accented the warm beige couch in the living room. The stone fireplace had brass fixtures, and a painting hung over it on the varnished pine walls. It was one of the newer contemporary artists she recognized, so she knew Patrick did not spend all his time in the woods.

Good taste did not mean he was a nice person. *He's plain ol' mean and grumpy*, she thought, but then he was not bad looking either. At breakfast she noticed his deep green eyes that flashed angrily when he talked. Or sensual lips that curled cynically when he spoke about her bag and her lack of clothing. How could he understand that she was essentially like a fish out of water in Alaska? She was not suited for the state, and that was all there was to it. Instead he acted like she was some spoiled princess, and that upset her most. *I worked for everything I own. I'm not going to let him make me feel less for what I have*, she told herself grimly. For the time she was here she would stay out of his way as much as possible.

She was staring into the fire when he threw something on her lap. She looked down at thick gloves and a pair of jeans. "What's this for?"

"You're going to go outside and chop some wood," he informed her.

Zariya laughed. "You're kidding right? Shouldn't you have a load of wood for times like this? You're a big strapping Alaskan man after all."

"I have enough wood for me. Now you're going to get some extra since you're going to be here for the next few weeks," Patrick explained.

"Hmm I don't think so. I get my wood delivered when I'm on Charming Island, eighty-five dollars a load." Zariya sat back stubbornly and gave him a direct stare. "You should try it."

His green eyes narrowed. “You’re going to pull your own weight while you’re here.”

“So you’re going to make me go outside and chop wood? That sounds a bit like a punishment to me.”

“Call it what you want. You’re doing it.”

Zariya picked up the clothes and walked to the half bathroom she had found under the stairs that led to the loft. She threw him a dark look. “I’m sure you going to try and make this as miserable for me as possible, but you won’t break me, Patrick Vallen. Better men than you have tried and failed.”

She came back a few minutes later dressed in the extra clothes he gave her and pulling the gloves on. He was standing there holding one of the biggest axes she had ever seen, but she took it silently and dragged it to his back door. When she opened it, a gust of cold wind made her catch her breath a little.

Patrick was standing next to his coffee pot pouring himself a hot cup of the steaming brew. “Better get to it, honey. This reprieve from the weather is not going to last long.”

“Eat yellow snow and choke on it,” she muttered under her breath. The childish insult made her feel better just by saying it.

“What?” he asked.

“You’re probably right. I should get to it,” she replied sweetly watching his eyes narrow because he knew that was not what she said the first time.

Zariya trudged out to where blocks of wood sat under a shed that protected it from the snow. A tree stump stood there and copying what she had seen on TV she picked up a heavy piece of wood and placed it on the flat surface of the cut tree stump. Pulling the axe to her she raised it over her head. She forgot about how heavy it was and felt the weighted mental end pulling her backward. She squealed because she couldn’t stop the momentum of her body, and Zariya fell back into the snow with a loud squeak. Patrick’s laughter greeted her ears, and she rolled over in the snow to see him standing at the doorway hold a cup grinning in her direction.

“Stupid, insufferable, blocked headed...” Zariya scrambled to her feet clumsily in the snow and threw him a sweet smile before pulling off her gloves to also give him the finger.

She went back to her chore. This time she braced her stance before she swung the axe high. “If Anne Hecht can do it in that show, then so can I,” she muttered and brought the axe down on the wood, splitting it two. She jumped up and down squealing in delight and turned to the doorway where Patrick watched her in triumph. There was something in his eyes that she couldn’t read which made her insides tremble. Turning back to the wood she put the first half up on the stump once again and split that in two. Nico trotted out to see what she was doing before going to explore.

She grinned widely as she worked knowing full well this wasn’t the outcome he expected. It was only after a few pieces of wood she felt her arms ache and her grip slip on the wooden handle of the axe. She threw off her gloves, ignoring the protests of her body and continued to chop the wood. When she had a good pile, she began to stack it on the back porch where she saw the rest underneath a blue tarp. Her hands were sore, and her body felt like it was going to break apart, but she grit her teeth determined to finish the task.

“I can get the rest of that.” His voice was low from the doorway. “You shouldn’t have taken off your gloves.

At some point she had noticed he left, but somehow she could still feel his eyes on her while she worked. Zariya knew he had been watching her from somewhere else and never stopped to even stretch her back from the tiredness.

“You told me to pull my weight, so I’m doing just that,” she said when she stacked the wood on top of each other. “I got this. Don’t worry about me.”

“Suit yourself,” he said and closed the door again.

When she was done, she looked at her new pile of wood with pride and then wanted to cry because of the pain in her body and arms. She stomped the excess snow off her boots. Even that little movement caused her to

wince before she stepped back into the kitchen. The smell of warm soup beckoned her, and she felt her mouth water in response.

"I thought you'd be hungry," he commented and sat down at the counter to eat.

She looked at the time and saw it was well past one in the afternoon. She had been out there for three hours. Zariya picked up the ladle, and it hurt her hands. She hid her pain filled wince from his stare and made herself lunch before sitting at his kitchen table to eat silently. Even though she wanted to devour the soup and thick chunks of bread she ate slowly, willing him to leave the kitchen so he wouldn't have to see in how much pain she was. Her legs and arms were cramping, and her hands felt as if they were on fire from swinging the axe. Finally, he left, and she breathed a sigh of relief letting her head fall to the kitchen table with a painful whimper. She didn't want to move, but she knew she had to. She lifted her head quickly, pasting a smile on her face when she heard the door to the kitchen creak when he opened it.

"I'm going to be in my loft for the rest of the day, working," he announced.

"You won't hear a peep from me," she said.

"Whatever." He let the door begin to close.

"Blockheaded moron," she mumbled.

"What?" The door swung open before it could completely close.

She looked at his questioning face and used her same charming voice. "I said I'll probably read."

Patrick gave her a look and shook his head before closing the door. She was amazed that he did not hear her insults by now. *His own ego must be pushing against his ear drums causing deafness.* She giggled at her own internal joke and moved painfully from her spot to go wash her bowl at the sink. When she sat down on the couch it took almost everything out of her to get her boots off and wiggle her toes in front of the roaring fire. She would have loved to go and roam his bookshelves but didn't think she could ever move from that spot again. Instead she picked up the newest Robert Ludlum he had in hardback on the table. She lay against the sofa with her feet facing the warm fire and sighed gratefully before opening the book. She became engrossed in

the pages before she knew it, and time seemed to pass swiftly by. She looked outside and saw it was already dark before moving her gaze up to the loft. There was no sign of Patrick, so she moved with aching joints toward the kitchen for a snack. Nico trotted after her dutifully, and she filled his water dish and food bowl. He was her only friend in the cabin. She certainly couldn't say that of Patrick.

Maybe it was the exertion of the day, but she wasn't very hungry. Thirst made her throat dry. She drank three glasses of orange juice and went to the bathroom to change into her pajamas, keeping her socks. She went back to the chair and sank into it gratefully. Zariya felt horrible. Her body ached, and she wanted to just sink into the oblivion of sleep. The blanket that she woke up covered in was still over the couch, so she pulled it around herself gratefully. Nico seemed to sense her distress, and with her hand in his fur, she drifted off to sleep even though it was only seven in the evening.

The pulsing pain that pumped through her body woke her up later on. The fire had burned down low, and she cracked her eyelids that felt heavy and moved to go get more wood. She ached so much she whimpered and slumped back against the sofa. Her hands burned from the palms up to her shoulder blades. Her legs kept cramping, and her head pounded. Nico licked her face softly and padded away. She felt tears trickle out from between her lids. This was not how she expected Christmas to turn out. She was supposed to be soaking in a tub in New York by now. Not silently dying in pain on some couch in the backwoods of Alaska. She cried for her pain and the unfairness of it all.

"What's wrong?"

His voice was close to her, and she knew the smart dog went and got his owner. She turned her face away. Pride made her refuse to answer, crying softly to herself. He shook her by the shoulder, and she cried out because the pain jarred her senses.

He laid her back gently and asked, "Where do you hurt?"

She glared at him through her tears and said accusingly, "Everywhere okay! I feel like my body is falling apart, and it's your fault!"

“I told you to let me help,” Patrick said. “You didn’t have to be so damn stubborn.”

“You said it after you saw me out there swing that axe for hours like some punishment!” She moved and moaned. “You think I’m some sort of high class prissy thing that wanted to go to New York and just shop, but I just wanted to be around friends. I have none here, and it’s so lonely sometimes I could just die!” She couldn’t stop the outburst seeing that it came along with the hot tears that were pouring down her face. “And I’m not going to apologize for making my money and spending it how I choose, Patrick. I don’t know you to care what you think. All I know is that you never walked in my shoes to get where I am, so screw you and your disdain of me. And I have to spend Christmas in a cabin with you, no decorations, no eggnog, and no tree! Leave me alone. Let me hurt in peace.”

He searched her face with green eyes that Zariya couldn’t read before he got up from the couch without a word. She closed her eyes and let her tears fall, and a sob broke free from her lips. She felt the side of the sofa dip. Zariya opened her eyes when he began to pull her pajama bottoms down her legs.

“What are you doing?” she asked trying to slap his hands away and failing.

“You want to feel better, don’t you?” Patrick asked.

“Yes, but how does that figure into you undressing me?” Zariya replied.

“It’s nothing I haven’t seen before, sweet cheeks.” There was humor in his voice.

“Before I was unconscious and couldn’t do it myself,” she pointed out.

“I’ll be purely professional, scouts honor.” Patrick raised two fingers to his temple.

“That’s not the scout salute.”

“I’m thirty-five, humor me.” A smile hinted the edges of his lips.

She nodded, and he helped her get undressed down to her panties and bra. “Jesus.”

She her him whisper the words and reminded him. “Professional, remember?”

He didn't respond but helped her turn over onto her belly and began to rub her shoulders with something that smelled like lavender. She cried out in pain once or twice, but the feel of his hands rubbing the ache from her body actually felt amazing. His hands were strong and firm, and even as he rubbed the most painful parts, she luxuriated in the feeling of his touch.

Your skin feels feverish. Are you hurting anywhere else?" His voice was gruff.

"My head's been pounding," she admitted and then moaned. "God, that feels so good."

She felt Patrick shift next to her. "I'll get you some pain pills when I'm done."

"Don't stop, not for a very long time," she said breathlessly.

"Jesus."

She heard his harsh whisper and wondered if he thought she was ordering him around. She would apologize if that was the case. He massaged her until she was almost asleep, and she made a soft sound of protest when he stopped and moved away.

He came back holding a glass of juice. He handed her two white pills. "Take these and drink this down. I'm going to get the thermometer and check to see if you have a fever."

She took the pills and swallowed them, draining the glass of juice. She still felt thirsty but didn't want to push her luck asking for more with Patrick being nice. He came back with a digital read out thermometer and stuck it in her ear. In a few seconds it beeped, and he looked at what it said.

"One hundred point two," he murmured. "It's either a low grade fever or from you being wrapped up tight sleeping. We'll check it again in a few hours."

The air became thick when she looked up at him. Zariya licked her lips which seemed dry all of a sudden. "Okay . . . um, thank you for the massage. I feel kinda better, still achy."

"Stop looking at me like that," he ordered gruffly.

"Like what?"

“With those big brown eyes full of thanks and sweetness. I like it better when you are cussing or insulting me behind my back,” Patrick replied.

Her eyes widened, and she laughed. “I thought you didn’t hear me.”

He snorted. “I heard you. Covering it with something polite didn’t help.”

“I’m not going to apologize. You were being an ass,” Zariya said stubbornly. “I know you don’t want me here, but you don’t have to be so mean about it. Hospitality is something you know little of and....”

“Oh, be quiet,” he muttered. He pulled her into his arms and took her lips in a kiss.

Zariya’s eyes opened wide, and a squeak was muffled against his lips. The sensual friction of his lips on hers was making her stomach tighten in response, and soon she closed her eyes and opened her mouth beneath his. His tongue delved deep when he was given permission to enter. Patrick leaned back on to the thick cushions of the sofa and pulled her across his lap so her body straddled his. He molded her to him, his hands massaging the small of her back and pressing her close. She could feel his cock hardening between her legs and moved wantonly until he groaned into her mouth. She didn’t know how one kiss could go from smoldering to a white hot flame in only seconds.

If it was a fever or just her body, Zariya knew that Patrick made her ten times hotter than she was before. She gasped when his lips traveled down her neck tasting her flesh and he cupped her breasts. He undid the clasp of her bra easily, and without preamble took her pert nipple into his mouth. Zariya cried out in pleasure. Even though her body ached it took a back seat to the sweet pleasure that Patrick created. His hands molded the curve of her ass, and she undulated against him in response. There was no doubt she wanted Patrick Vallen in the worse way, even though he hated her being there.

That thought pulled her from her haze of delight, and she pushed away from his searching mouth. “Stop, please stop.” With difficulty she climbed off his lap, and her arms ached while she tried to refasten her bra. She picked up her shirt from the back of the couch where it was thrown and pulled it on the best she could. All the while his eyes watched her, and when she did meet this gaze, she could see the desire there.

“I’m sorry that happened,” she said huskily. “I’m not trying to be a tease, but given the situation and the fact that you can’t stand me, I think this is not a place we want to go.”

The dark look he threw her way belied the intense passion they shared earlier. “Damn you for making me want you.”

He stood and walked away leaving the thermometer and the glass on the table before heading back to his loft. Zariya forced herself to get up and go to the kitchen to quench her thirst with more juice before heading to the sofa and lying back gratefully with a sigh. With Patrick gone she could feel her head throbbing again and the ache of her body increase. She closed her eyes and willed sleep to take her, knowing that one of the aches inside her was the one he created. She wanted a man who looked at her and saw something she wasn’t. If he knew the things she went through in her life, he would change his mind. But she wouldn’t tell him to earn pity or his respect. No, Patrick Vallen had to be off limits because he was the type of man who could breach her carefully built walls and break her heart.

Chapter Four

Patrick paced his loft far away from the edge so he couldn't look down at the woman sleeping on his sofa beneath him. Just thinking about her made his cock throb painfully in his jeans. Before when she was caught in the storm and he was getting her warm, he only paid light attention to her skin. Giving her a massage was a mistake. Her body was so tight and lithe under his hands, he could see in his mind her over him, riding his cock. He closed his eyes and swallowed thickly. *Stop thinking of her like that. She is just a spoiled debutante from New York!* But even that mental slap couldn't erase how she responded to him. She was a firecracker waiting to explode. Her skin gleamed in the firelight and God she tasted so damn good he wanted to take her right there. Patrick knew he would have if she didn't stop him.

She was at least thinking when it came to them coming together. He pegged her as one of the women who liked him only for his money in the city of lights. In his heart he knew there was something else to Zariya Huette. Did he dare peel back the layers and find out what? Maybe he was scared to find out she was everything he accused her of. He knew he was tarnished in some ways, but Patrick was unwilling to put himself out there to find out. *No, it's better to keep your hands to yourself, buddy boy*, he chastised and got ready for bed. Tomorrow he would let her use his shower upstairs or even take a bath in the tub. He would be polite and offer every comfort he owned. The temptation to take her was too great, and Patrick wanted Zariya gone as soon as the Alaskan officials could get a rescue chopper to come and pick her up.

He put on his own pajamas thinking about the silky pink things she had on downstairs and groaned when he got into bed. He willed his cock to go down from its erect state and his arousal to subside when he closed his eyes to sleep. Even in a light doze he could still see images of her in his mind. Lips parted, gasping as he touched her, and he wanted her to beg for more. Her cries woke him up, and at first Patrick wondered if his sexual dreams had come true. He sat up and saw Nico standing by the rails. The dog looked back at his master and then down to where Zariya slept.

Patrick was up in an instant and down the stairs. She thrashed around on the sofa still asleep but obviously restless. When he grabbed her shoulders she was hot to the touch, and he knew that she was sick. He held her to him, and she moaned miserably while he stuck the thermometer in her ear. The read out said one hundred and five. Without hesitation Patrick picked her up and headed for the stairs. He laid her in the bed and tapped her on the cheek gently.

“Zariya, come on, sweetheart, open your eyes. Tell me what hurts,” he encouraged gently.

She opened unseeing eyes that were glazed with fever and mumbled something unintelligible before closing them once more. He had one sick lady on his hands, and he knew the first step was to cool her down. He stripped her with haste and went into the bathroom to get a pan of cool water, a washcloth, and towels. Patrick came back and began to wash her body down, trying to cool her from the fever. He cursed himself for not thinking. He may have saved her from hypothermia, but she had been exposed to the elements which overworked her system. He sent her outside to chop wood, and now her worn down immune system was reacting to her being cold, wet, and overtired. *You deserve to be shot*, Patrick thought guiltily as he worked to lower her temperature with cool water on her body over and over again. He laid a cool compress on her head and dribbled crushed aspirin in water into her mouth while she protested weakly. Then he wrapped her tight and watched her throughout the night as she thrashed and mumbled in the throes of her feverish state.

“If you think I’m going to let you take credit for my work, you’re wrong, Charles Snitz,” she cried out. “And keep your pudgy hands off me!”

Those were only a few of the words she cried out throughout the night and into the next day as her fever raged on and off. There were times when she was cool to the touch, and Patrick thought she was past the worst of it. Then her fever would spike again, and she would be in delirium once more. In those states where she mumbled, caught in her own dreams, Patrick learned more about her work life and bits and pieces about her past. He tried the Alaskan officials to tell them about her condition and the confirmed what

he suspected, that she was suffering from exposure, and it made him feel worse. He had lived in this place for years and should have known the signs. He let his anger put her in danger and regretted it. They were grounded until the weather cleared, and he was told that the storm had settled over the area all the way up to the Bering Sea. All he could do was continue taking care of her until the fever broke and keep her hydrated.

It took three days for her fever to break, and then she slept most of time fighting a bad cough and flu-like symptoms. In that time Patrick was her constant companion. Helping her to the bathroom and staying by her side. He fed her nourishing soup and held a bowl when it didn't stay down. All the while she kept apologizing for being such a bother to him and insisting she could do things herself even though she obviously could not. After a week she was up to sitting up in bed and watching DVDs on his flat screen upstairs. Even that tired her out. He came upstairs to see her watching *Miracle on Thirty-Fourth Street*. When she saw him coming Patrick noticed she wiped her eyes hastily. That didn't stop him from seeing the tears.

"You okay?" he asked. He felt his feelings changing toward her, seeing the fragile woman beneath the strong exterior she portrayed. They were from two different worlds. He saw the world and preferred the seclusion of his Alaskan home. She couldn't wait to be away from it.

She gave him a too bright smile. "Yeah it's this damn cold, makes my eyes water and my nose run."

He knew it was more than that but said nothing. "I brought you some lunch."

"I'm not really hungry, Patrick, thank you, but you know I can come downstairs," she said. "I hate that you have to cater to me."

"You're as weak as a kitten after the fever and then the flu," he said with determination. "You're going to stay up here until you are better. It's my fault anyway for your getting sick."

She gave him an owlish look. "You know if I didn't want to go outside to chop that wood you couldn't make me. I'm partly to blame myself for wanting to prove that I could do it and more."

“Yeah but you would have never had to if it wasn’t for me,” Patrick replied.

“How about we call it a truce? We could go around in circles about this all day.”

Her sweet smile made his breath catch. Patrick resisted the urge to swoop in and kiss her since he had been thinking about it for days.

Patrick coaxed, “I know you’re not hungry, but you need your strength. I’ll make you a deal. You eat and take a nap, and this evening I’ll let you come downstairs for a rousing game of monopoly.”

“You’re on. I’m a shark at that game. In New York we had a game that went on for.... Never mind its nothing.” She had a wistful smile on her lips while he placed the tray on her lap. “I can sleep downstairs again, Patrick. You can’t be comfortable sleeping on that sofa.”

“I’m fine on the sofa and stop trying to be a martyr. You’re staying up here in this bed and that’s final,” he snapped then regretted it. “I’m sorry okay? But you don’t have to try to be inconspicuous in my home or censor your words. You miss New York and your friends. I get that.”

Zariya nodded, and tears brimmed her eyes. “It’s just the holidays you know. Last year I spent it on Charming Island and couldn’t even call anyone because it was storming so bad it knocked the phones out for two weeks. This time I thought... Well it’s Christmas, and I really love....” She gave a watery laugh. “Being sick has made me a crying mess. I’ll eat and take a nap.”

He waited until she ate and took the tray downstairs. When she settled down to rest he went about making Christmas at his home, something he had not done in a long time. He lived in a place where fir trees were prominent. It was easy for him to go cut a small one and find the tree stand and decorations he packed away long ago. He swore that he would never use those decorations again, and it hurt a little to pull the dusty boxes out of storage.

It was for a good cause, to give Zariya her Christmas. It was the least was he could do. He strung lights and hung ornaments from the tree. He even found some CDs with music that reflected the holiday. His conflicted mind wondered why he was going through so much trouble just for her while his

hands worked to complete the job. He used the remote to turn on the stereo in the corner, and the soft voice of Frank Sinatra crooning “Merry Christmas To You” filled the air. Patrick felt excitement in his chest as he went upstairs to wake Zariya.

He shook her shoulders gently, and she opened her sleepy brown eyes to look at him. “Patrick?”

“Let’s get you showered and downstairs,” he said gently.

“What’s that music?” She furrowed her eyebrows as he helped her to the shower.

“Wait until you get downstairs and you’ll see.”

She stepped inside and closed the door, and he stood outside impatiently tapping his foot until twenty minutes later she came out clean and dressed in the second pair of pajamas from her bag. He couldn’t help the smile that lit his face when she looked at him curiously and tried to peek around his wide frame. Zariya narrowed her eyes and tried to go in the opposite direction, but Patrick flawlessly blocked her.

“What are you up to, Patrick Vallen?” She shot him a look. “Why are you grinning?”

“Close your eyes, and you’ll get a surprise.”

“How am I supposed to go down those stairs with my eyes closed?” she asked.

He sighed and lifted her into his arms. “Hand over eyes and head against my chest, please.”

Zariya obeyed, and Patrick went across the room and down the stairs with her in his arms. He felt comfortable. This was something he could do every day. In the living room he put her on her feet and turned her to face all he had done. Patrick pulled her hand from her face, and she gasped when she opened her eyes. She looked around and made a squeal of delight before throwing her arms around him and holding him tight. *That’s why you did it*, his inner voice said as he enclosed her in a hug, to see happiness shining in her eyes. His heart felt full, and she was warm against him. No matter how he tried to fight it he was finding it hard not have feelings for Zariya.

* * * *

Zariya was tucked in on the sofa covered in a thick afghan while the fire crackled and heated the room. Christmas songs played from one to the next softly in the background. The sweet smell of dinner actually made her stomach rumble even though she had little appetite over the last few days. The lights from the Christmas tree flickered against the silver, gold, and red ornaments on the tree that filled the room with the scent of outside. She looked around at all Patrick had done, and it was all for her. Never in her life had anyone taken such care to make her happy for the holidays. Until she was grown up and she could do it for herself and celebrate the way she wanted.

She loved the layout of his cabin home. He had the downstairs decorated in beiges and hunter greens with splashes of color throughout, like red vases on tables and bronze pieces of artwork. The upstairs was his sanctuary. She could see that in the way he decorated. Big screen television with tons of videos plus a huge mahogany desk that held his computer and laptop. She had grinned when she saw replicas of all the superhero characters he loved. Men never grow up, she thought. She knew no matter how old, their eyes would light up when you even mentioned Green Lantern or Batman. Her eyes went back to the decorations he put up just for her. The thought thrilled her to know he actually cared.

Patrick strung lights and tinsel stars from the banisters. And even sprigs of holly and mistletoe from the mantle above the fireplace. He was being so nice, and she wondered if it was from guilt or because he actually cared. She preferred to think it was the latter. While he was in the kitchen making dinner, she snuck from the sofa on shaky legs and plucked a piece of the mistletoe from the bunch on the fireplace. She got back to her position on the soft cushions and inhaled the sweet scent of the fresh plant before tucking it between the cushions at her back. The atmosphere thrilled her, and she was so glad to see that Patrick did not view her as an interloper anymore. He came in with a tray carrying two plates with steam curling from the food

he prepared. There was an endearing crooked smile on his face that made her heart jump in her chest.

“What did you make?” she asked with a smile. “It smells delicious.”

“I hope you’re hungry. It’s mashed potatoes and roasted chicken with asparagus on the side,” Patrick answered as he knelt to put the tray on her lap. He took his own plate, a fork, and napkin and sat on the plush carpet with his back against the sofa where she lay. He smiled, and she returned it before picking up her fork and digging into the dinner. They ate in companionable silence not talking but letting the music and the atmosphere surround them. Even though she thought she wasn’t that hungry. She was surprised that she dug into the food so voraciously and ate most of her dinner.

She wiped her mouth and placed the napkin on the tray with a sigh. “That was really good. I should have said it sooner but you are a good cook.”

“Think I should open my own Alaskan restaurant?” he teased.

“As long as it’s not venison, I’m there,” she replied.

“I make it a rule not to kill Bambi or his mother,” Patrick said.

Zariya laughed. “You’re a man after my own heart.”

He took the tray when he stood and went into the kitchen with the remnants of their meal. He came back with two cups of hot chocolate, and she sipped hers while he set up a small table within her reach and pulled out the monopoly game.

She rubbed her hands together. “Okay time to decimate my next victim.”

Patrick laughed. It was a rich sound that was nice to hear. “Aren’t you taking this game a little seriously?”

Zariya shook her head. “That’s a negative, my dear man. When it comes to Monopoly there is no love only war.”

“Okay, and you’re a nutjob.” His eyes twinkled as he spoke.

“Nutjob with a thimble,” she replied waving the little metal piece in the air. “What are we playing for?”

“I didn’t know there were stakes to this game. I thought that was poker,” Patrick said.

“The rules are as follows... We play for stakes. What’s your prize if you win?”

Patrick thought for a minute. “Okay if I win and you are up to it, I want cake for Christmas. I have all the stuff. I’m just scared to make it.”

Zariya laughed loudly. “You’re scared of the cake?”

He gave her a boyish hurt look. “They keep burning. I watch the thing. I swear I do, but they always burn. I don’t know why. I think it’s a conspiracy.”

She laughed until her sides hurt. All the while he was passing her the usual share of money for the game. Wiping tears of mirth from her eyes, she said, “Yes, that’s it. It’s a cake conspiracy against Patrick Vallen.”

“Fine, don’t believe me.” Patrick sighed and asked, “What do you want?”

She pursed her lips and pretended to lock them. “I reserve the right not to tell you my prize until I win.”

“Is this one of the rules?”

Zariya winked. “It’s one of my rules.”

The game began with both playing it safe. That was her plan, to draw him in. And when he had one of a few properties, she bought Park Place and Boardwalk. From there the game became fierce, and Zariya covered half the board with green houses and red hotels. She watched as Patrick’s money dwindled every time he landed on one of her properties.

One hour into the game he sighed. “You really are a shark at this game.”

“You could always sell out to me and let me rule the board,” Zariya prompted.

His eyes flashed wickedly. “I’ll fight to the death.”

The game continued with ferocity until she took his last dollar and squealed in delight. “I win!”

“Can I have a do over?” He gave her an innocent look.

“This is not a game of do over.” Zariya wagged her fingers at him. “Now for my prize.”

“Which is what, a foot rub, breakfast in bed?”

“You already made me breakfast and brought it up every morning for the last week. No, my wish is much simpler.”

“What is it?”

She pulled the piece of mistletoe from between the cushions. “One kiss, that’s all I want.”

His eyes darkened to a deep green. “Maybe that’s not such a good idea.”

“What harm could come from one little kiss?” she asked. “Besides, there’s mistletoe. Technically you can’t refuse. Mistletoe fairies and all that will be quite upset.”

“You’re making that up,” Patrick said.

“Am I,” Zariya said solemnly. “Let’s not test fate. Kiss me, Patrick.”

“Does that line work on all the guys?” he teased, moving closer to her.

“I don’t know. You’re the first one I tried it on.”

“Trust me it worked.”

Those were the last words he said before their lips met and Zariya was lost. The one soft kiss soon turned heated, and Patrick knocked over the small table in his haste to pull her closer. His arms went around her, and she was pressed against his chest. Their tongues met and dueled until Patrick moaned deep in his throat. His hands roamed from her shoulders to her hips and back again. She wanted to feel his big hands against her skin so badly that it erased all other thoughts. But this time it was Patrick who pulled away, breathing hard and smoldering eyes.

“You’re still sick.” His voice was hoarse and thick with desire.

“Somehow that’s not what’s making my body ache,” she whispered.

She could still feel his lips on her and licked them. He groaned in response and took her lips again in his deep passionate kiss that made her senses reel. She sank her hands in the thick hair at his nape and whimpered softly under the onslaught of his mouth.

“God, I want you so damn much,” he whispered between kisses.

“I want you to, Patrick. This feels right.”

Their eyes met, and he pressed another hard kiss on her lips before pulling away. “No, you are still weak, and I won’t take advantage of that.”

“Not even if I want you to?” Zariya asked.

“We’ll have our time. Until then it’s time for you to go to bed before I forget being chivalrous.” Patrick cupped her cheek.

Zariya rubbed her head against his hand. "Promise?"

"It's a definite promise," Patrick replied.

She held out her hands to him. "Take me to bed, Patrick."

He groaned. "Don't say it like that, baby, please. It's going to be hard enough sleeping."

He lifted her and took her upstairs, and while she settled in between the warm sheets, she had no problem sharing a few more sultry kisses that made it more difficult for him to leave.

"Stay with me," Zariya asked. "Hold me until I fall asleep."

"I don't know if I can just hold you, Zariya," he admitted.

She looked up at him, and for the first time in her life felt the urge to open herself up. "Please, Patrick, I'm so tired of being alone, tired of being strong all the time. I want to lay in your arms and feel sane even if it's just for a little while."

He nodded and kicked off his shoes before climbing into bed and under the covers with her. He pulled her near, and Zariya snuggled close to his side. His warmth comforted her with the steady beat of his heart and the way he caressed the skin of her shoulder. There were so many times even when she was among friends in New York that she felt like one woman all by herself. That was one of the main reasons she wanted to go back the city. At least she would be alone in a crowd and could pretend that it wasn't so bad. *It's amazing that in the middle of nowhere in his arms that feeling has simply erased.* It was one of the last thoughts she had before her still recuperating body gave in to its tiredness, and she fell asleep. More than once she turned in the night and drowsily felt his body turn with her. Sleep claimed her once more, and she was spooned against his body. Maybe he didn't want to be alone either.

Chapter Five

The restless energy inside her was due in part to the hungry looks Patrick gave her. Each time he brought her anything. His eyes smoldered in her direction, and his hands lingered on hers. When he kissed her the passion built until she could hardly stand it. He treated her like fine china, thinking she was still fragile from being ill. Could he tell how much she wanted him, to be writhing beneath him while they made love? He even made it a point to shower when she was asleep so he would not be tempted. *Oh he'll be tempted all right. Sometimes a woman has to do what a woman has to do*, she thought with a smirk. And set about the task of showing Patrick exactly how much woman she was.

She took a quick shower while he was outside, and Zariya put on the lacy white panties and bra that was in her bag. She thought vaguely about her lack of packing to go to New York. Her excitement about shopping and being among friends outweighed her necessity for actual clothes. She would have hit the stores as soon as she got there. Next time she would not make that same mistake. She went downstairs, and excitement made her knees tremble along with a bit of uncertainty. Maybe he didn't want her after all and he was just toying with her. Zariya knew she couldn't stop now when she threw a few more split logs on the fire. She settled on the thick afghan she spread on the carpet in front of the fire to wait for him, and watched the snowflakes fall heavily outside the window.

She heard his boots clump as he entered the kitchen and stomped the excess snow from them. Zariya pressed her hand over her heart to stop the nervous excitement. The door to the kitchen opened, and he came inside taking off his coat, and draped it over the sofa. His eyes caught her in front of the fireplace, and his face held a question even as she smiled. The desire that she has seen in his eyes so often sparked to life while his gaze traveled along her body.

"What are you doing?" His voice was husky.

"Seducing you," she replied.

“This isn’t a good idea.” He used the excuse she expected. “You’re still sick.”

“The thing is, Patrick I feel fine, actually energized, appetite back, and I want you.” She gave a nervous laugh. “While I am an independent and career-oriented woman, I don’t have a lot of experience at this. I am kinda of flying blind at this seduction thing. All I know is that I want you, and I want you to teach me how it is to be loved by a man like you, please.”

Without a word Patrick unbuttoned his shirt and stripped it from his shoulders. He kicked off his boots and strode across the short distance to her and fell to his knees. Patrick pulled her into his arms, and she could feel the heat of his skin against hers before he took her lips in a frenzied kiss. *Oh, yes, this is what I want.* It was a hazy thought before her head became muddled with passion and hunger for more. Nothing felt as good as his lips on hers. She felt his fingers deal with the catch of her bra, deftly freeing her breasts to his touch. He cupped them and massaged them under his wide palm, and Zariya moaned in pleasure. She held onto his broad shoulders as his mouth moved down her neck to take her nipple into his mouth. Zariya cried out when his hot mouth closed around the pert peak of her breasts. He held her to him as he lay her down on to the blanket. Patrick’s hard body covered hers while he took her lips again.

His hardness was pressed against the apex of her thighs, and she spread her legs so he was nestled more against her, raising her hips to relive the ache he was creating. Zariya arched in pleasure when he kissed and gently bit her neck. The combination of his lips on her and his hands roaming made her body writhing under him. The feel of his tongue against her skin was sending delicious currents of pleasure along each of her nerve endings.

He reached and captured her hands, twining his long fingers with hers and holding them above her head. “I’m going to taste every inch of your delicious body until you can’t stand it. Do you know how much I’ve wanted to do this?”

“Please, yes,” she whispered.

He lifted his body from hers to strip his boxers off and to take the fragile lace of her panties down her legs. When he settled against her once more,

Zariya raised her hips pressing against his hard cock that was rigid between her thighs. Patrick groaned in response.

“God, baby, don’t do that. I want to sink myself in you so deep right now,” Patrick moaned. “I want this to last.”

All Zariya wanted was for him to fuck her until they were both senseless. Instead he rolled to his side and buried his hand into her hair. The kiss turned wild and untamed. She matched the movements of his tongue, and they two mated sensually. Patrick reached between her legs and delved between the folds of her flesh to finger her clit. Zariya didn’t know she could get so wet that his finger dipped inside her pussy easily. She arched pressing against the source of the pleasure. His digit moved inside her with slow deliberation, each sensuous movement heightening the yearning. He kissed her stomach, and each kiss went lower until she stopped him with hesitation.

He met her gaze. “Don’t worry, sweetheart.”

“I’ve never... Um never had that done to me,” Zariya explained shyly.

“I’m glad to be the first. You can stop me if you don’t like it. Let me taste you, darling, please,” Patrick asked.

She nodded and moved her hand away. He lips began their exploration once more. The soft skin of her lower torso was his playground. With each touch of his mouth against her belly, she felt her stomach tighten with desire. Patrick’s hands were firm but gentle as he parted her legs. She felt his hot breath on the core of her want before he pulled her to him and brought the wet lips of her pussy to his mouth.

“Oh my God!” Zariya cried out and shuddered.

He licked her clit and dipped his tongue in her over and over again until her body writhed under the onslaught of his mouth. He loved her with his tongue ravenously until she could hardly stand it. His moans were guttural in the back of his throat, and his enjoyment was obvious. She didn’t know pleasure could be found like this or could exist just by his mouth alone. When he used his tongue to fuck her, penetrating her with deft ease, Zariya thought she would die from it all when her first orgasm shook her body.

“That was...unbelievable!” she gasped out. “I’ve never had one.”

He looked at her curiously. “You’ve never come before?”

She shook her head. "I told you. I'm not very experienced at all this."

"Baby, you ain't seen nothing yet," he promised with a grin.

Patrick moved and lay beside her again. They kissed, and she could taste her own essence on his lips. Running on instinct, she wrapped her hand around his cock to stroke the smooth velvet erection while his fingers played at the bud of her clit once more. He slipped his finger inside her, stoking the fire that had ebbed when she came. The tension grew, and she stroked him faster as her own orgasm built. He fingered her to release, making her pussy flow around his hand, and she felt her wetness against her thighs. Her cries of completion filled the room.

Patrick lay on his back and pulled her to cover his body. "I want you now."

Zariya nodded and held his hard length in her hands and slowly took him inside her. She watched him grit his teeth as her tight flesh enclosed around him. She arched as he filled her, so thick and hard she could feel him stretching the walls of her pussy.

"God, I don't think I can take this slow. You feel so damn good," Patrick groaned out between gritted teeth.

She felt her thighs tremble on either side of him. Zariya wanted to feel everything, how he would love her hard. "Do it, Patrick. I want it all."

He pulled her low until his lips were against her ear. "Move on me, baby. Ride me."

Zariya closed her eyes, and intuition guided her movements. She lifted her ass and let his cock slide almost out of her body. Then she took him in with delectable strokes of her hips and released him coated with her juices. Patrick cupped her breasts together and licked her nipples as she moved. The sensation caused her to increase the pace, and each time she slid onto his hard manhood, her body trembled. He grabbed her hips and impaled her on his hard cock with quick succession, until she cried out and gave him control.

"I want more," he said harshly.

He flipped her under him again, and she felt his restraint slip. Patrick pushed into her wet waiting pussy hard, pounding into her deeply with every thrust. Zariya felt him shudder above her. The attack of his lovemaking

caused tiny sounds of pleasure to escape her lips. He slipped his hands under her hips pulling her more firmly beneath him. She wrapped her legs around the taut muscles of his ass and lifted into each of his thrusts. Zariya felt his muscles tense and release under her hands and her thighs. The raw power of his body was amazing to feel.

“I’m going to come again!” Zariya cried out.

“Yes, baby, come with me,” Patrick moaned.

He pumped into her, wringing another cry of release from her and taking her higher while he came just as strong. He fell against her before rolling to his side and bringing her with him. His breath was coming in shallow pants while she felt her heart beat try to slow to a normal rhythm.

“I have never felt anything like that,” she breathed. The warmth of the fire was against her toes as she rubbed them on his thighs.

“I still can’t believe that you have never had an orgasm,” he said mildly. “You struck me as such a woman of the world.”

She rose up on her elbows and looked at him seriously, while his hand idly played with her hair. “Don’t let looks fool you. My life is not what you think it is. Well it wasn’t for a long time.”

“Tell me about it. I want to know more about you,” he encouraged.

Zariya didn’t usually talk about her life. So she was surprised when the flow of words began. “I grew up in March Projects in Brooklyn. My mom always worked, and my dad was nowhere to be found. I wanted to be out of that place from the time I was five. No hanging with the homeboys on the block, no partying with the girls. They used to call me uppity Ms. Thang, and I never paid any attention.” She took a breath and continued on with a very hard story. “Until they made me pay attention when I was sixteen. A couple of the boys caught me in the hallway, took me up to the roof, and made sure I knew I wasn’t so proud that they couldn’t have me.” Zariya swallowed at the painful memory, dulled by time, but still very real. “My mom came home, and I told her, and she didn’t believe me. She said girls always cried rape when they got caught. I left that night and went to live with my aunt in Queens who did believe me, and she got me therapy. Nothing was ever the same. It took me a long time to stand anyone touching me, let alone men.”

“Dear, God!” Patrick said harshly. “Were those guys ever arrested?”

Zariya gave a hollow laugh. “Patrick, it’s the projects. Even if it was reported, the cops around there would have written a report, given me a look, and sent me home.”

“What about any relationships you were in?” he asked.

“Michael and I met when I was in college getting my degree in chemistry. He looked out for himself first, in life, love, and school,” she explained. “When I did his homework and got him through classes, I was the best girlfriend ever. I found him cheating on me when the perfect papers stopped. I was told I was cold, a brick, a lump of ice in bed. Then I figured out I had to be hard, so hard no one could get in, and I am who I am because of it. A girl from the projects who climbed the ladder the hard way.” Zariya gave him a small smile. “They looked at my ass and called me names behind my back in every lab I worked at. But I never let it stop me. I was going to be the shark in a man’s world.”

“You had a lot to deal with.” Patrick leaned over and kissed her with passion that left her breathless. “Trust me, Zariya, you’re not cold.”

“You thought so when you first met me,” Zariya pointed out. “I recall you saying I was a typical girl from the city.”

He sighed. “That’s my own old wounds that may have healed, but the scar hurts every once in a while.”

“I told you my sad tale. How about you tell me yours?” she invited.

“Picture it, a young boy with a lot of dreams moving to the big city.” He waved his hand out in front of him like he was showing her a picture. Zariya giggled while he continued. “I got my first novel published seven years ago, under the pen name of Devon Gage.”

She gasped in astonishment. “I love those books. Is that really you?”

He nodded. “Yes, it’s me. *The Syndicate Mysteries* is my baby. But on to the story. I moved to New York. Alaska was way too small for me even though it’s vast. I wanted lights, fast cars, and pretty women. I got all three. I drove a Porsche. I live in a pent house, and every night was a party.”

“What happened?” Zariya asked waiting for his next words.

“Well an engagement happened, to one gorgeous woman, refined and very much the socialite. Her name was Madison.” Patrick’s voice was light as he slipped into the memory, yet she could still hear the underlying pain. “I was the hick from a small town, and to her and her friends, I was going to be their meal ticket. I learned the hard way when I saw my advances dwindling and her and her best friend wearing the newest styles. All she would say is, you don’t mind, honey, and would kiss me until my common sense was gone. There came a time when I did mind it, and I cut the money off. Then her true face came through under all that beauty. She was cruel and ugly. She told the cops I beat her, got me arrested for the black eye that mysteriously appeared. It took a really smart cop who is now one of my closest friends to see the truth and Madison to confess she set me up. By that time I was done, and back home to Alaska I came, feeling free and vowing never to go back.”

Zariya wrapped her arms around him and held him tight for awhile. “It seems we both saw the bad side of people, didn’t we?”

His big hands caressed the curve of her thigh. “Guess we did.”

Zariya met his great eyes and cupped his face. “I set out on a trip to find the perfect holiday in New York. Instead I think I found the right Christmas, right here in your arms.”

Patrick lowered his lips to hers, and desire bloomed between them once more. He slipped inside her easily, and she moaned beneath him. His touch alone proved to her that she was not cold at all. She melted when the right hands touched her and made her ache with need.

Chapter Six

Christmas day came into Alaska with howling winds that buffeted Patrick's cabin home and rattled the double-paned windows. He knew it was coming, and on Christmas Eve while he stacked firewood by the kitchen door, Zariya baked cake in the oven and made dinner for them both. He looked up more than once when she worked in the kitchen humming softly. Her eyes met his, and she smiled. Patrick knew he was in love. How was it possible it snuck up on him so quickly? In between their arguments and misconceptions about each other over the past few weeks, he had fallen in love with the chocolate-skinned Zariya.

"We don't have any Christmas presents," she said as they lounged on the sofa after breakfast.

"I don't mind in the least. I'm here. You're here. That's enough for me." He kissed her temple, and she rubbed his leg.

She tilted her face up to him. "Still I wish I could give you something to show you I care."

Patrick grinned. "How about this? We both have one hour to make or come up with something as a gift."

He loved seeing the glitter of excitement in her eyes. "Really? That sounds like fun."

"Then let's do it." He slapped her on the curve of her hip. "Yup, sexy lady, we have an hour."

She giggled and ran up the stairs. "Do you mind if I use some of that paper at your desk?"

What are you gonna do with it?" he teased.

Zariya winked at him. "Just you wait and see."

He watched her head up the stairs with a smile on his face that quickly turned to a frown. How long would this last? She hated Alaska, and he hated the city. He knew she would be living on Charming Island. He wondered if he could be with her knowing that each day she was longing for the New York skyline instead of snow-capped mountains that he loved. There was so much about Alaska she probably didn't know. He smiled wistfully thinking

about the smell of spring with a hint of honeysuckle. How the grass felt like carpet under your feet, and wildlife came up to your door. Those were things he loved. Would she stay around for him to show her the good side of Alaska through his eyes?

She wouldn't feel alone. He would make sure of it—from taking a cruise, to see the Northern Lights, to picnics near this spring he knew of that trickled lightly from an outcropping of rocks. He wanted the chance, but it had to be her choice to be with him. As of that very moment his heart belonged to her.

Patrick already knew what his present was going to be, so he sat and waited patiently for her to come back. She came down the stairs taking them two at a time. Instead of her pajamas, she had taken to wearing his boxer shorts, T-shirts, and some of his socks. He couldn't complain because the way she filled out those boxers and the expanse of skin that was left bare was definitely appealing.

"You didn't even move," she accused.

"I don't need to. I already know my gift," Patrick replied mildly.

"Hmmm you better not jip me, Mr.Vallen. Baby wants gifts."

He sputtered with laughter. "Baby?"

She sat next to him and shrugged. "Hey, it seems to work for those women on TV."

"You have a peculiar sense of humor," Patrick replied and rubbed his hands. "So what did you get me?"

"I used my one talent that has nothing to do with perfume," she announced.

"Oh, baby, you have so many other talents." He leaned forward and nipped her neck.

"Talents that use my hands..." Zariya stopped him before he could even speak and placed a small towel on his lap. "Of the non-sexual kind. Merry Christmas, Patrick."

He opened the towel, and there sat little origami animals. A giraffe that she made using the colored markers he had in his drawer, an elephant, and a

crane. Beautiful little trinkets of folded paper but definitely made with care. He picked up the giraffe and held it in his palm.

“You think they’re silly, huh?” she said.

He placed them carefully on the coffee table and pulled her into his arms. “No, I think they’re amazing. I’m going to put them on my desk, so I can see them every time I write.”

“Really?” she whispered. Her eyes shined with happiness.

“Yup.” He kissed her gently. “Thank you for my gift.”

Zariya nodded before she began to frisk him. “Now where’s mine?”

“It’s not on me,” Patrick said secretively.

“Then where is it?”

Patrick held up his hands.

“You’re giving me the gift of invisibility?” Zariya asked slowly.

Patrick laughed. “No, you nut. I’m giving you one of my patented massages. Come on upstairs.”

“You get undressed and lay on the bed while I get my oils all warm,” he coaxed when they got upstairs and she stood next to the bed.

“I’m excited,” Zariya said with a giggle and pushed the boxers down off her hips before pulling the T-shirt off. She undressed in front of him easily showing off every curve and dip in her form. Patrick couldn’t help but stare at .It caused instant arousal.

He turned to go into the bathroom saying under his breath as his cock throbbed in his pants, “You’re not the only one who’s excited.”

Patrick came out of the bathroom in a few minutes carrying a small bowl. In the bowl of hot water he had a bottle of sensual oil warming. She was lying in bed totally nude in a seductive pose, and all thoughts of a massage went out of his mind. He wanted to climb into bed and sink himself inside her.

“I’m ready for my full body massage,” she purred. “Maybe there’ll be a happy ending.”

Patrick laughed. “That’s so perverted. What kind of masseuse do you think I am?”

“The kind I like, so rub me down.”

“While I love the view, I’m going to be good and ask you to turn over so I can give you my present,” Patrick instructed. “Then when you’re pliant under my touch, I’ll pounce.”

“I like that word.” Zariya rolled over and wiggled her bottom in anticipation. “I’m ready, Patrick.”

“Stop wiggling like that. If not there’ll be no massage, and I’ll be ready for something else,” he said while he sat on the bed.

“That’s probably the pouncing part.” Her words were somewhat muffled by the pillow.

Patrick grinned as he poured some of the warm oil in his hand. “It just might be.”

He dribbled warm oil on her back and watched her shift when the liquid hit her skin and pooled in the sexy curve of her back. He rubbed his hands together before moving them slowly up her body with firm pressure. She moaned under his touch and arched her back with each stroke of his nimble fingers.

“Lay still,” he said. He could hear the huskiness in his own voice.

The massage was for her, but Patrick was even more aroused stroking her ebony skin that glistened with oil. It amazed him that the candlelight glittered off her skin the way it would off polished mahogany. One thing he would never get enough of was touching her. He planned to do it for the rest of his life if she let him. Patrick poured a drizzle of oil down each thigh and began to work his hands down her firm thighs and calves. Ever her feet felt smooth under his fingertips. He applied more pressure to the soles of her feet working the arch until she moaned in pleasure.

“God, that feels so good!”

Her hands were crossed, and her head rested in the crook. Patrick watched her clench them in pleasure as he worked on the other leg. He moved back up her body working the Nubian flesh, and her responses to his touch made him hotter than he thought imaginable. Patrick picked up the bottle of sensual oil and poured some onto the curve of her ass. He watched the thick oil flow between the sexy crease. He rubbed the firm cheek of her buttocks, and her legs parted voluntarily to give him access between her

them. Patrick couldn't resist letting his hands roam down between her legs and massaged the folds of her pussy from the back. The oil made the velvety lips glisten, and he watched as the juice of her arousal began to flow. Massaging her was forgotten as he played, parting the thick lips of her flesh and exposing the coral pink of her pussy to his gaze. He dipped his finger inside her, and she gasped his name as he buried his long digit inside her. Nothing was as erotic as watching the muscles of her body clutch at his finger when he withdrew it only to plunged it inside her once more.

"Trust me, okay?" he whispered.

Patrick withdrew from her pussy and parted the cheeks of her ass. The oil left a slick trail over the tight hole of her anus, and it beckoned him to the forbidden barrier.

"Patrick?" He could hear the doubt and hesitation in her voice.

"I won't hurt you. I promise, Zariya. Let me please," he implored.

"Okay," she whispered.

He began to massage her again until the tenseness left her body. He slipped his thumb inside her pussy, and she cried out and pushed back against his hand. With his other finger he rubbed the entrance to her ass, coating it with more oil and sinking his finger inside her slowly.

"Oh, God," she moaned in response to this new intrusion.

He worked both fingers inside her simultaneously. Her ass rose to meet his fingers. Each movement was faster and faster until she was clutching the pillows and crying out in earnest as an orgasm beckoned. "Let it come, baby. Ride it out." Patrick's voice was harsh. He wanted to see her come hard, gasping under the contact of his hands. When she came, she raised her ass higher to take more of his fingers, and Patrick was lost. He stripped quickly, not caring where he threw his clothes, and was on the bed with her in seconds. He lifted her to her knees and buried himself to the hilt in her still shivering pussy.

"Oh yes, Patrick, oh yes!" She clutched at the pillows while she called his name.

Her voice drove him to delirium as he fucked her from behind. His hands clutched at her slippery hips while his cock slipped into her pliant flesh

repeatedly. Her body writhed in a seductive dance beneath him, and he watched the light reflect of her slick skin. She came hard, screaming in release, and her body was taunt, suspended in that one moment of completion. She fell against the bed gasping for breath, but this day was just getting started. Patrick planned to make love to her for a long time.

* * * *

Patrick turned her over and brushed the tangled dark hair from her face. He caressed her dark-colored cheek before pressing a deep intense kiss on her full lips. Her little moan and her fingers scraping his scalp when she sank her fingers in his hair stoked the fire already building inside him. He decided to kiss farther down her body to hear her cry out and plead for more. Zariya turned her face to him, and Patrick took her lips in another searing kiss. He tasted and explored her mouth with his tongue. When her tongue tangled with his, his groan of pleasure blended with hers. He pulled away and looked into her eyes that were heavy with passion. The need to touch her was like fire in his blood. Patrick cupped the full globes of her breasts and played with the tight nipples. Her eyes were still fixed on him, and he watched as she bit her lip when his hand was filled with her sweet flesh. Lower still he took his caress until he touched her pussy, swollen and sensitive with need. A small cry escaped her lips when his fingers slipped between the barrier and into her moist core, and he lowered his head to her breast.

“I love how wet you get when I play with you,” he murmured. His fingers slipped in and out of her body as he spoke.

Zariya spread her legs wider in a silent plea for more. He obliged sinking two of his digits deeper inside her.

“See how your pussy takes me in? God, I want to taste you.”

She moaned her disappointment when his hand moved from between her legs. He could see the raw passion in her eyes when she saw him lick her juices off his finger. She kissed him, and he felt his cock throb knowing she could taste herself on his tongue. Her arms wrapped around him, and he took the kiss even deeper. Zariya’s tongue grazed his teeth before she slipped

it into his mouth following his in its sexual dance. She pressed herself more intimately against him, and his cock nestled between her oily thighs.

A groan rumbled deep in his chest. "You wipe every thought from my mind except for wanting you."

"Yes." She nibbled his lips as she spoke. "I want you to only ever want me."

At her admission he pulled her to him and kissed her again devouring her mouth while his hand caressed her ravenously, trying to touch her any and everywhere. He filled his hands with the soft mounds, massaging them with a strong firm motion, and sucked at her nipples and squeezed the skin of her thighs and ass. She reached for the oil and spread some on her breasts. He watched as she made her breasts and torso shine, and Patrick had the vague thought that oil was never so erotic as right now. She pressed her body against him letting her nipples touch the thatch of hair on his chest. Her gasp of delight told him she enjoyed the new sensation she created. She rubbed herself against him like a sleek cat enjoying the stimulation of flesh touching flesh.

Zariya kissed her way down his body until she came to his cock. Without preamble she took the thick shaft in her mouth, and Patrick groaned in tortured delight. Her mouth was hot, and she sucked his length into the warm cavern behind her lips and licked the shaft and the smooth tip ravenously. Along with the feeling of watching her take him between her lips and play with his rod with so much zeal, he wanted to blow his load between her lips.

"Oh fuck." His words came out on a breath that hissed out between his teeth.

She took her time pleasing him, and he let her until he could no longer bear the sweet sensations running through his body and causing his skin to feel as if it was on fire. He pulled her away with desperate hands and up his body. She grabbed his cock with a firm grasp while they kissed and led him to the entrance of her pussy. He sank into her depths gratefully. Zariya began to move slowly, and he watched her eyes take on that sultry look. His fingers tightened on her hips gripping the skin while she rode him with sensual

movements. She bent low like a jockey on the back of a horse, and Patrick lifted her just a little so he could take her nipple into his mouth. She cried out, and her hips pumped faster against him.

“Ride my cock hard, Zariya. That’s right, baby. Take it all,” he ground out harshly.

He grabbed her hips pulling her against him hard, her moans and cries fueling him on. He could feel her slick juice coating him, flowing against his cock.

“Oh I’m going to come!” She threw her head back, and with the candle casting a glow around her, Patrick thought she looked gloriously beautiful.

“Oh, Zariya, come for me, sweetheart.” He took her nipples in his mouth once more and sucked deeply.

That sent her spiraling into an orgasm, and with a roar, Patrick let himself go pounding inside her until he groaned against her breasts and fell over the edge of reality. She fell against him, and he didn’t know how long they lay there in a sensual haze. Her body occasionally trembled, and every time her body shook, he bit his lip because the sensation was doing delicious things to his cock.

“That was some gift,” she murmured against his neck and giggled.

“Honey, I owe you another one because I enjoyed that way too much,” he replied.

She lifted her head and smiled. “When we get out of here, come to New York with me, and I’ll show you the city through my eyes.” She snuggled against him. “It will be so great, Patrick, you and me in New York for the New Year.”

He was glad she was not looking at him because she would have seen the frown on his face. Maybe getting her to stay was not going to be in the cards after all.

Chapter Seven

All things had to end. Patrick knew this. He closed out his books with a climatic ending. Movies always had a happily ever, but no matter what the scenario, all things had an ending. The morning he woke up and the wind was not howling outside the cabin or buffeting the wood, he knew the storm had passed.

“Coast Guard calling Wolfs Den Four. Coast Guard calling Wolf Den Four, over.” The static from the radio woke her up while he headed across the room to pick up the receiver. “Patrick Vallen, are you there, sir? Please pick up, Wolf Den Four, over.”

Patrick sat at the small desk where he kept the radio in the corner and flicked the switch before speaking into the receiver. “This is Wolf Den Four. Patrick here. Mike, I keep telling not to call me sir.”

Mike Johnson was one of the coast guard’s finest in Alaska, and Patrick had formed a friendship with the man when he had to do research for his last book.

The laugh came across mixed with static. “It’s the formality of the job, Patrick. “What’s the status of your guest, Ms. Huette?”

“Zariya... I mean Ms. Huette is doing well,” Patrick responded. He looked over to where she sat in the bed, and she gave him a wink.

“Well we got a break in the weather, so we can get a chopper up there to you by the morning.”

Patrick hesitated to answer, but when he glanced at Zariya again she was nodding frantically in excitement. The look of pure joy did nothing but put a lump of coal in his chest. Was she in that much of a hurry to get out of there? He thought over the last few weeks they had formed something good and lasting, but maybe he was wrong.

“The lady is saying yes to transport,” Patrick affirmed.

“Great. We’ll pick up at zero nine hundred in the morning. We have another system moving in fast, and that would be the only time we can pick her up before the window closes,” Mike informed him.

“Roger that, over and out,” Patrick said and flipped the switch on the radio.

From the time he shut the radio off her squeal echoed in the loft. “We’re going to New York!” She held out her hand to him, and when he came to stand next to the bed, she wrapped her arms around him in a big hug. “I can still make the last two events for my new scent. We’ll have to get you a tux when we get there. Oh my God, you’re going to look gorgeous in a tux! Me and you baby on the town dancing the night life and the new year’s parties.”

It took a minute for her to see he was not answering. She looked up at him with a question in her eyes. “You are happy to be going, right?”

“What if I don’t want to go, Zariya? What if I want us to stay right here?” he asked in a subdued tone.

She gave a soft laugh. “You’re serious? You want us to stay here in this seclusion?”

“Yes.” He cupped her cheeks. “Let me show you Alaska the way I see it, honey.”

“I’ve seen Alaska, Patrick. Why can’t you say yes to coming with me?” she implored. “I understand you had a bad experience...”

His laugh was harsh. “Is that what you call it, a bad experience? I left that city for a reason. Why would I want to go back?”

“For me, the same way you want me to stay here. Why can’t you come with me?” she asked. “What about my job?”

“I didn’t think that far ahead. I was thinking that we’d have time to figure it all out here,” Patrick admitted honestly.

“You only saw your needs and wanted to live out here like a hermit,” she snapped. He saw anger flare in her eyes. “You want me to make a big concession for you, but you’re unwilling to do the same. So this relationship is supposed to be one-sided in your favor?”

“I’m not saying that. You’re different than those people, but I don’t want to go to the city and...”

“And what I become one of those simpering bitchy women who only think about clothes and parties and putting you in a tux,” she finished for him.

"I'm not saying that!" he said in frustration. This was going all wrong, and he tried to get the conversation back on track. "Listen, our relationship is so new. I think we need time alone to get it to a good place. Maybe in the spring we could go."

She tapped her finger on her chin. "So tell me. What about my campaign, the hard work for my perfume line, and the accreditation that comes with it?"

He gentled his voice. "Honey, do you really need to be there?"

"Don't use that passive aggressive BS on me, Patrick. I have had enough people in my life try that and fail miserably." She climbed off the bed, and her hands were fists at her side. "You can write your books from a tree in Timbuktu and still sell millions of copies and stay out of the limelight. It's key to my perfume lines to see the creator, the woman behind the scent."

"I guess it's up to you to pick which is more important, your accreditation or our relationship." He turned to her. "Your choice."

"We have a relationship?" she asked incredulously. "Well that's the first I've heard of it. You never said one thing. No Zariya there's something here let's work on building it. No, we make love and this morning when reality breaks in, then you say the word that you think will make me swoon... relationship. For all I know I was your bed warmer for a little while."

"It's certainly not like that. I love you, okay!" He spread his hands wide. "Is that what you want to hear?"

She shook her head, and tears rimmed her eyes. "No, not like that, not as some kind of tool to keep me here or to placate me. If you had said that a week ago, maybe, but now. How can I believe words you throw at me in the middle of a battle you want to win?"

"That's it then?" he asked trying to swallow past the lump in his throat.

"I guess so," she replied simply.

"Good riddance to you then. I don't need you in my life," he snapped and pulled his pants on. He let anger take the place of hurt. "You can go back to being shallow and lonely with your new boots and your shopping spree. Leave me in peace."

She laughed softly, a sad sound that broke his heart. “The thing is, Patrick you’ll be as lonely as I will be, but you helped create this situation. Go ahead and play the victim. I’ll be just another girl who used you and broke your heart. Keep telling yourself that, and see if it keeps you warm at night.

He left with her words ringing in his ears. Anger burned in his gut because of what she said, but truth rang in his heart. *Am I really being stubborn and oblivious to what she needs and thinking only about me?* As he asked the question he put the wall up to keep from admitting the answer. It felt better to be hurt and angry than to admit he was wrong.

* * * *

Zariya refused to cry, even as she washed the one outfit and the two pairs of pajamas in her bag. She sat on a small stool in his laundry room wearing only a sheet and a pair of his socks looking at the clothes spin in the washer. How could she be so wrong about him? She gave a harsh internal laugh. *Look at how he treated you for the first few days you were here. He only wants what’s best for Patrick.* How could he expect her to give up all she worked for just to sit in a secluded part of Alaska with him? After all she told him and all she went through, she thought he would understand and see how she overcame too much to ever let anyone keep her down. *Every day my life is a damn fight. Why should trying to have a relationship be any different?* she thought sarcastically. When she got back to New York, she would ask for a transfer back even if it meant taking a pay cut. She doubted they would if the new line did well in profit demographics. This thing was Patrick was the last straw, and she wanted out of Alaska. She would never step in this part of the country again.

She heard the back door open and Patrick stomping his boots to get off excess snow. Nico walked in and pressed his extremely cold nose against her arm. He had obviously been outside and seemed to be trying to say talk to my master. The small laundry room adjoined the kitchen, and as he passed to go to the counter, he saw her sitting there. He stopped as if he wanted to say something, and her heart leapt in anticipation. Instead he sighed and stomped into the kitchen. Walls tall and strong as ever, she thought

miserably. She watched the clothes once again and silently rebuilt her own wall so she would not hurt. He threw love at her like it was some kind of concession. Why couldn't he see that it would have been the best gift of all?

They played the avoidance game for the whole day. If she was in the living room reading, he was up in the loft, and she could hear the soft tapping of his computer keys. When she went up for a bathroom trip or to even watch a movie his footsteps were heading down the stairs a second after, without a word. The silence was as deafening, as if they were screaming at each other. It was driving her crazy until she wondered if sleeping outside in the cold would be better than being in a tense standoff with this man she loved. Zariya knew she loved Patrick, and that made it even worse. The first man she could ever really say she truly loved and this is what it came to in only a matter of weeks. She was sexually passionate and giving when they were in the throes of lovemaking. *Maybe my heart is the one place that is cold as ice.*

"You sleep upstairs tonight. I don't want you to have to spend the last night sleeping on the couch." His tone was gruff.

"Thank you," she said hesitantly. "Patrick..."

He turned his head to face her. His expression was unreadable, and she shut down again. "Nothing, never mind... thanks again."

The day turned to night. She ate dinner in front of the fireplace, and he ate in the kitchen. She didn't even see him when she went to bed, and it was then she let the tears fall and sobs wrack her body. *Is he listening to me cry from downstairs?* The question crossed her mind when she felt his warmth against her back.

"Don't cry. Please don't cry?" he whispered against her ear.

"Will this change anything? Can we get past this?" She looked up at him, imploring him with her eyes. She wanted him to say yes. God, she wanted him to.

"I don't know. When the sun comes up, we'll see," he admitted.

Her voice broke when she snuggled close to him. "Well hold me tonight. Don't let go. Just hold me so I don't forget this."

She cried until she couldn't anymore, and he just held her tight. There was something strong between them. She knew it. They were their own

worst enemies, two stubborn people who were not willing to give an inch. It was her last thought before she fell asleep with the rhythmic beat of his heart against her ear.

Morning came much too soon in her opinion. When she woke up, he was gone as if the inevitable was too much to bear. She dressed and got her things together before coming downstairs. Zariya found him in the kitchen drinking a cup of coffee and staring broodingly through the window at the scene outside.

“Is the coffee still warm?” she asked.

“You better drink it quick. While you were in the shower, Mike called. The system they are trying to avoid is coming in quicker than they expected. They’ll be here in a few minutes,” he replied.

“Oh, I thought you were trying get rid of me quicker,” she teased.

“Your choice,” he stated and stepped away to head to the living room.

“The sun is up. Does anything look different now that it is morning?” she asked referring to the statement he made the night before.

He hesitated and without word a Patrick left the room. She sighed feeling her tears threatening once more and fighting to hold them back. Zariya took no more than two sips of the hot coffee before she heard the loud sound of a helicopter coming to get her. Instead of feeling elation, she felt like a condemned woman going to her final sentence. She picked up her small bag and headed to the front door. Patrick was already standing outside as the chopper descended to the open clearing out front. The blades kicked up fresh snow from the outlying trees and not packed into the ground. She stood away from him as one man got out of the chopper and bent low to avoid the blades as he ran up to the wooden patio.

“Patrick,” the man yelled over the loud blade of the Coast Guard helicopter. He held out his hand, and Patrick took it shaking vigorously.

“Mike, I didn’t expect you to come all the way out here,” Patrick commented.

“Next time I’ll stay for some of that brandy you keep in stock and a card game,” Mike yelled with a grin. “Is she my package?”

“Yup this is Ms. Huetten,” Patrick replied. “Take good care of her. Get her home safe.”

“You got it, my man. I’ll regale her with my stories of bravery,” Mike yelled, and Zariya couldn’t help but like this man she had never met. “You ready to go, Ms. Huetten?”

Patrick pursed his lips looking from his friend to Zariya but said nothing. With just a curt nod in her direction, he turned to go back into the house, but his steps never made it there. As she walked away she looked to see him standing at the door, and her own pace faltered when he came down off the porch and out into the snow.

“Patrick,” she called, and even though Mike’s hand was at her elbow urging her on, she couldn’t move.

She saw his lips move knowing that he called her name but not being able to hear it over the loud whir of the chopper. He began to move towards her fighting the deep snow with each stride of his long legs. Mike looked at her curiously when she turned to go back to the man she loved. Nothing was worth losing him, not a career, not a new line of perfume. She would work something out, but it wasn’t going to be at the loss of something that she knew would last forever.

“You know if I leave you here, you won’t be able to get back to Charming Island for weeks, maybe months,” Mike said with a grin.

“I know. I don’t care! I’ll see you in the spring, Mike!”

She threw a huge smile back at him knowing she was making the right decision, and elation filled her chest seeing Patrick running toward her in the snow. Without another word she moved away to meet Patrick half way.

“I’ll go with you to New York. Mike will wait while I throw a few things in a bag,” he yelled when their lips parted. “I love you, Zariya, and I’ll be happy as long as I’m with you. I can write from a tree in Timbuktu or a penthouse in Manhattan just as long as you’re mine.”

“I’ll stay here with you. Spring fashion is always better anyway in New York, and by then we’ll figure something out,” Zariya called out in return. “I love you too, Patrick. My job can be flexible if they need me. If not, I’ll start my own damn company!”

“You have no clothes,” he yelled.

“Do I need them really?” She raised an eyebrow at him. “You have plenty of shirts, socks, and boxer shorts.”

They grinned at each other before he pulled her into his arms and their lips met in a kiss. She had found the right Christmas, the perfect holiday in the middle of Alaska and the harsh snowstorms that went with it. It wasn't Manhattan, and it wasn't Fifth Avenue, but it was everything she wanted. Zariya forgot the world while they lips clung together in a fiery kiss and the chopper blades lifted snow around them in a magical swirl.

The End

About the Author

Dahlia Rose is the best-selling author of contemporary and paranormal romance with a hint of Caribbean spice. She was born and raised on a Caribbean island and now currently lives in Charlotte, North Carolina, with her five kids, who she affectionately nicknamed “The Children of the Corn,” and her biggest supporter and longtime love. She has a love of erotica, dark fantasy, sci-fi, and the things that go bump in the night. Books and writing are her biggest passions, and she hopes to open your imagination to the unknown between the pages of her books.