

Gift Wrapped



for

Christmas

Mona Ingram

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by

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Chapter One

Laid off. Downsized. Services no longer required. No matter how they worded it, Maddie was out of a job. The long walk back to her desk took her through the main office where her co-workers couldn't bring themselves to look at her. Amazing how many were on the telephone, speaking urgently in what she guessed were one-sided conversations.

She made it back to her tiny cubicle on the outer wall. It was a small, awkward space but at least she had a slice of window; it helped her to feel that she had contact with the outside world. There had been times during the six months she'd worked here when it had seemed that it was just her, her computer and the endless stream of paperwork that flowed over her desk day after day. She really should have considered that when she'd decided to pursue a career in accounting. She liked people, liked to interact, but there was very little chance of that in her present job. Correction, her former job.

She stood beside her desk and tried not to smile. The truth was, she was glad to be leaving. If she wasn't careful she'd be laughing out loud, and that would never do. She was one of a team of eight who had been assigned to a specific account, and the other team members had been devastated by the news. It wouldn't do to appear happy in front of them, when their lives seemed to be crumbling. Especially now, with Christmas only two months away. Tomorrow was Halloween. Trick or treat.

What had management said? Beside the part about losing the account, of course? Something about cleaning up your personal workspace and taking the rest of the day off. Paycheques would be available tomorrow, could they come back? They'd phrased it all so politely.

She glanced around the cubicle. There was nothing here she wanted. She hadn't brought in personal items like most of the rest of the staff. Maybe on some subconscious level she'd known that it was only temporary.

She walked to the window and looked down on Olympic Plaza. They'd started flooding the rink yesterday, much earlier than normal. A popular gathering spot year round, it had been built for the Olympics in 1988. The ice, fresh and pristine, reflected glints of sunlight. She lifted her gaze to

what she could see of the Rockies between the tall buildings. First the foothills, then the jagged snow-covered peaks in the distance. The sight never failed to thrill her and remind her that she'd made a good decision when she moved to Calgary.

In her eagerness to get going, she almost forgot the beautiful Cross pen that Lily had given her when she started six months ago. At least she didn't have to worry about her roommate's reaction to her sudden lack of employment. Right from the beginning, Lily had questioned why she was pursuing her CGA degree. It was a heavy load, studying almost every night and working full time during the day. Oddly enough, Maddie had thought she was enjoying it. Or at least that's what she'd been telling herself. It wasn't until moments ago when she'd been informed that her services were no longer required that she realized she was happy to be free.

Free. This time she did smile. So she'd wasted a year and a half. That wasn't long in the great scheme of things, and the time hadn't really been wasted. Now she had a much better grasp of finances than when she'd started the course. That had to count for something. What was it her father had always said? "Knowledge is a valuable tool to have in your toolbox." Something like that. She sobered as she thought about her parents. She missed them every day, even though they'd been gone for five years now. Those oft-repeated sayings of her father's were becoming truer every day. She fingered the pen, slipped it into her purse and reached for her coat.

She walked through the large outer office, smiling and nodding to anyone who would meet her gaze. She had no idea where she was going, except that she was getting out of the office.

The elevator was on the top floor, and she watched the numbers change as it came closer. She would miss this building. One of the older buildings in Calgary, it had been purchased by an oil exploration company. Not surprising, since that's where all the money was these days.

The new owners had done well by the old structure. They had upgraded the services while retaining all of the old charm. Maddie had been thrilled when she found that they'd kept the wood and brass interior of the elevator cars. The metal required constant polishing, but there was something solid about the inlaid wood panels, surrounded by ornately carved brass frames. The lobby was several stories high and featured two massive chandeliers, but in her opinion the best

thing the new owners had done was to keep the concierge desk, and the old gentleman who manned it. David Hawthorne was seventy if he was a day, and was unfailingly cheerful and polite to everyone who took the time to speak to him. She wondered if David had known about the upcoming layoffs; he seemed to know everything that was happening in the building.

A soft *ping* alerted her to the arrival of the elevator. The doors opened to reveal two men inside. They glanced at her and stepped aside, but continued their conversation.

“...Christmas decorations in the stores and Halloween isn’t even over yet.” The shorter of the two men was speaking.

“Tell me about it.” The tall one nodded. “And I have a ten-year-old to buy for.” He sounded genuinely worried. “I have no idea what to get her.”

“Why don’t you ask her?” The words popped out of Maddie’s mouth. When would she learn to keep her thoughts to herself?

He turned slowly. “I’m sorry, did you say something?” There was a touch of frost in his voice, but he was looking at her as though she might be his saviour.

She didn’t have anything to lose. She braced herself and looked up into eyes that were green, flecked with gold. “I said why don’t you ask her?”

He seemed to consider her words for a moment, and then gave his head a quick shake. “She’s only ten.”

Maddie didn’t like the way he dismissed her. “Haven’t you heard? Ten is the new thirty.”

The elevator came to a stop in the lobby. The man stepped back with a courtly gesture, allowed her to exit first, then caught up to her in a few strides. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to be rude.” He gestured helplessly with his hands. It seemed out of place coming from him; he gave the appearance of being in control of everything in his life. “You see... I just...” He sucked in a lungful of air. “It’s my niece’s first year without her parents, and I’m not very experienced at this.”

The man who’d been in the elevator with him was waiting a few steps away. Green Eyes looked up. “See you tomorrow, Bruce.” The man gave a quick nod and walked away.

Maddie watched him make his way through the revolving door. “I’m so glad the new owners of the building kept that revolving door in place. It adds to the charm of the lobby, don’t you think?”

He gave her an odd look, then got back on topic. “Do you think that’s a good idea, asking a ten-year-old girl what she wants? Seriously?”

Maddie thought back to all of the gifts she’d received when she was a child. She’d been grateful to receive them, but they were rarely what she wanted. Judy Blume books when she’d rather have had RL Stine, tartan kilts when she’d rather have a cool pair of jeans. She felt guilty for thinking of it now, but if she could save one little girl from a similar fate, then she’d have accomplished something.

“Yes,” she said, noticing the way his dark brown hair curled just above his collar. “I’d be willing to bet that she knows exactly what she wants.”

He absorbed her words then nodded slowly. “All right, I’ll do that.” He smiled, and his demeanor changed radically. He really was quite handsome when he smiled. “Thanks for the help.” He waited for her to start walking and strode along beside her. “So you like the revolving doors, do you?”

She smiled up at him. “I do. They’re not something you see in new buildings.” They passed the concierge desk and she waved at David. “Goodbye, David. See you later.” She wasn’t about to discuss her recently unemployed status in front of the tall man at her side.

Green Eyes allowed her to enter the revolving door first, then started it moving with a push of his hand. For some reason she always took baby steps when walking through the door and she was slightly off balance when she popped out onto the sidewalk, but managed to recover.

“That sun is deceiving,” she said, pulling her coat closed at the throat. “It’s cold out here.”

He was wearing a beautifully cut short overcoat with a soft tartan scarf draped around his neck. She wondered idly if his wife helped him pick out his clothes. If so, she had excellent taste.

“Well,” he said, extending his hand, “I have a meeting, but thanks for the advice.”

“You’re welcome.” She took his hand. “Good luck with your shopping.”

He released her hand, turned away and then turned back. “I’m sorry, I didn’t get your name.”

“Maddie.” She smiled. “Maddie LaRocque.”

“Pleased to meet you, Maddie. I’m Chase Drummond.” He flipped up the collar of his overcoat.

“Have a good evening.”

She stared after him for several long moments. Chase Drummond. She backed up a few steps and looked up at the massive piece of granite over the entrance. *Drummond Building*. And she'd told him she approved of the door! She almost laughed aloud. What other surprises did today have in store for her? She wasn't sure she wanted to find out.

* * *

Maddie found herself walking toward the outdoor skating rink at Olympic Plaza, which suited her just fine because she wasn't ready to go home yet. The area was popular with nearby office workers all year long, and Maddie was no exception. In the summer months, she frequently walked the block and a half at lunch time. Come to think of it, the fresh air and pleasant surroundings had probably helped her stay sane during her incarceration at CCA Accounting.

She really had to stop thinking like that; nobody had forced her to work for the accounting firm. She crossed Eighth Avenue and ran lightly up a set of shallow steps leading into the Plaza. The last slanting rays of the sun lit up the far side of the rink, the spot where she usually sat during warmer weather. Thankfully it was deserted now; she didn't feel like engaging in conversation.

She sat down and stared at the ice without really seeing it. The reality of what had happened this afternoon was just starting to sink in, and the pressure of tears began to build behind her eyes.

"No," she said aloud, hunching into her coat and rocking back and forth. "I won't let this get me down."

For a brief moment, she wondered how Allan would take the news and then stilled, startled by the direction of her thoughts. Allan wasn't part of her life anymore. That had ended over six months ago.

Why had she thought about him now? Was he so firmly associated with failure in her mind? She let out a long, shuddering breath of air. She'd met Allan Jameson during her final year at Simon Fraser University. He was a couple of years older, but she'd been attracted to him instantly. They dated several times before he told her he was a widower and had a young son.

Her thoughts drifted to Connor, and she wondered how he was doing. He'd been a shy young boy of four when she first met him, and it was Maddie who had suspected the child was dyslexic.

She'd learned everything she could about dyslexia, and the boy had slowly come out of his shell after his condition had been formally diagnosed and dealt with.

Looking back now, she had to ask herself if she'd loved the child more than the father. Or was that her way of handling rejection?

She'd thought things were going well. Allan could be a bit domineering, but she attributed that to the fact that he was older. She'd been working in the accounting department at a large lumber supplier, and when she'd been promoted for the second time, Allan had suggested she look into studying for her CGA.

Things changed while she was studying for her accounting degree. She didn't know why she hadn't recognized the signs at the time; it was so clear to her now. While she was at home studying—a built-in babysitter—Allan had been going out in the evenings.

And then a little over six months ago, he'd announced he was going to marry his late wife's sister.

The sun slipped behind one of the tall buildings surrounding the plaza, and Maddie shivered. Hearing Allan's announcement had been the second lowest point of her life. How could she have thought they were building a life together when clearly he'd been heading in a different direction?

It had taken her some time to realize it was partly her fault. After the deaths of her parents, she'd ached to be part of a family again, and had convinced herself that she'd found a family with Allan and Connor.

Not that Allan was guiltless. He'd talked about a future as well, but in vague, unspecific terms. She dabbed at a tear that had managed to escape. What hurt most was that she'd come to love Connor. For the first few months after she'd left Vancouver, she worried about him constantly, surprised that he'd become such a big part of her life. The experience had left her shaken. Thank goodness for Lily, who had encouraged her to come to Calgary to 'start fresh'.

Everyone should have a friend like Lily Hsu. Friends since high school, they were opposite in almost every aspect. With encouragement from her friend, Maddie was slowly regaining her confidence. She hadn't dated yet, but that would come. In the meantime, she wouldn't make the same mistake again.

Chapter Two

“You don’t look very upset about it.” Lily had insisted on opening a bottle of wine when she heard Maddie’s news. Her movements were quick and efficient as she screwed in the corkscrew and drew out the cork. She sniffed the wine and splashed some merlot in each of their glasses.

“I know.” Maddie swirled the wine. “Does that make me a flake?”

Lily hopped up onto the stool across from Maddie. “Hardly.” She raised her glass in a quasi-salute. “You’re the least flaky person I know. Look at it this way. You were lucky to escape.”

“You never were overly enthusiastic about me studying for my degree.” Maggie glanced across at her friend, who didn’t deny it. “It looks like you were right.”

Lily made an impatient gesture with her hand. “It’s not about who’s right. It’s about you being stuck in a job that you didn’t really like. Now you’re free to get on with the next phase of your life.”

Maddie gave a rueful smile. “I thought I was doing that when I moved out here.” She glanced around the spacious apartment. “I keep thinking that I’m cramping your style.”

Lily raised one shapely eyebrow. “Don’t worry. The men aren’t exactly beating down my door these days.” She didn’t look the slightest bit concerned.

“That’s because none of them meet your exacting standards.” Maddie studied her friend openly. Lily had done that thing with her hair Maddie could never figure out. She twisted it somehow with a flick of her wrist and shoved a couple of chopsticks through the loose knot to hold it. Maddie’s hair was long as well, but she’d never been able to achieve the same effect.

“You need Asian hair to do this,” her friend would say, yanking at her long black tresses. “You have the wrong genes.”

Lily was small and stunningly beautiful. It wasn’t unusual for men to trip over their feet when they walked past her in the street. Born of a Thai mother and a Taiwanese father, she had grown up in Vancouver where her parents owned an import/export business on the fringes of Chinatown.

Maddie stared into her wine glass. She’d promised herself to take a day before thinking about what to do next, but that was easier said than done. She’d always worked. Even in high school

she'd had a part-time job of some sort or the other.

“So what do you think you'll do?” Lily had always had an uncanny ability to sense what was bothering her, and today was no different.

“I don't know.” Maddie took a sip of wine. “I was going to put off thinking about it, but that's not working. Trouble is, I honestly don't know what I'd like to do next.”

“You could come to work for me.” Lily tilted her head to one side. “But somehow I don't see you working in a silk screening studio.” Lily owned the premiere textile silk screening studio in Alberta, and had recently added fabric purses and casual resort wear to her catalogue. The new items were selling so quickly she was having trouble keeping up with demand.

“Thanks for the offer, but you're right.” Maddie ran her fingers up and down the stem of her wineglass. “I suppose with Christmas around the corner I could get something temporary. All the stores will probably be hiring.”

“Retail clerk?” Lily's perfectly shaped nose wrinkled in distaste. “At Christmas? You'd hate it after five minutes.”

“You're probably right, but speaking of Christmas, you'll never guess who I met today.”

“Come on, Maddie. You know I don't like guessing games.”

“Okay, okay. I met Chase Drummond.”

Lily sat up a little straighter. “Chase Drummond as in Drummond Exploration?”

“And the Drummond Building.”

“That's right.” Lily tapped her lips. “He owns the building you were working in. What's he like?”

Maddie thought for a moment. “Tall, dark brown hair, greenish gold eyes. Quite handsome, actually. And nice.”

“Nice? No guy wants to be called nice.” Lily wrinkled her perfect little nose.

“Well, I only talked to him for a couple of minutes.” Maddie thought back to the scene in the elevator. “I butted in on his conversation. He was talking about buying a Christmas gift for a ten year old girl, and I put in my two cents worth.”

Lily frowned. "I didn't think he was married. His picture is in the paper a lot, and he always seems to have an attractive woman on his arm."

"The same one?"

Lily lifted her shoulders. "I've never paid that much attention. So what about the girl? Who is she?"

Maddie looked into her empty glass. She didn't remember drinking the wine. "I got the impression that she's a relative but he didn't actually say that. He said something about it being her first year without her parents."

"And he doesn't know what to get her for Christmas, and you offered to help."

Lost in thought, Maddie did not reply.

"Well, did you?" Lily was becoming impatient.

"Did I what?"

"Did you offer to help?"

Maddie shook her head. "Sorry, no. But you've got me thinking. How many people are there downtown who have no idea what to get their loved ones for Christmas? And if they do know what they want, they have no idea where to get it."

Lily caught on right away. "Not to mention the gift wrapping. Most men I know would rather eat worms than wrap a gift. And for the ones who have already bought a gift, you could offer a gift-wrapping service." Her dark eyes sparkled with enthusiasm. "You have such creative ideas when it comes to gift wrapping."

"It's something I've always enjoyed doing..." Maddie's words trailed off. "What am I thinking? I'd need somewhere to set up a little shop. There's not likely to be anything available at this time of year. And even if there was, they'd want top rates for it."

Lily splashed some more wine into their glasses, her brow furrowed in concentration. "You'd need somewhere downtown. I think that's where your business would come from, agreed? Men mostly, who either hate the idea of Christmas shopping or don't have the time." Her gaze turned inward, the way it always did when she was trying to remember something. "Wasn't there one of those little shops in the lobby of the Drummond Building? You know, the ones that used to sell

cigarettes and chocolate bars and magazines?” She looked across the counter. “That would be perfect for you.”

Maddie brightened. “You’re right. That would be an ideal spot. It was closed up before I started working there. Something about the new building owners not wanting to sell cigarettes. It’s been well camouflaged. They put down an area rug with some comfy seating and massive plants. You don’t even notice that it’s there. I suppose if they were willing to move things around, it could work.” She nodded to herself. “It could work very nicely.”

“So. You’ll go and look into it tomorrow, right?”

Maddie sometimes wondered if Lily made up for her small size by being so pushy. And yet she was right...there was no time to waste.

“I have to go back to pick up my cheque tomorrow. I suppose I could ask David about it. He’ll know where to direct me.”

“David?” Lily gave her a puzzled look. “Do I know him?”

“No. David is the concierge. He has a desk just to the right of the entrance.” She nodded to herself. “He knows everything that goes on in the building.”

“Then he’s your man.” Lily toyed with her wineglass. “I have a good feeling about this. You’ll go in the morning, right?”

Maddie knew better than to argue. “Yes, I’ll get right on it.”

“Good. I could eat something. How about you?”

Maddie was surprised to realize that she was hungry. “Yes, but I’m not sure what we have.” She slid off the stool.

“It’s my turn to cook.” Lily pulled open a drawer and pulled out a handful of takeout menus.

“How about some Thai food? It won’t be as good as my mother’s but it will do.” She picked up her cell phone, scrolled through her numbers and was soon ordering.

* * *

Maddie studied her reflection in the mirror the next morning. Her eyes sparkled with an enthusiasm that had been missing for some time now. She turned sideways, studied her profile,

then turned back to face the mirror. Confident. That's the image she wanted to project. She had no doubt that the requirements for renting space in the Drummond Building were fairly stringent. It might be an older building, but it was in a prime location, and commanded some of the highest rates in the city.

Her long auburn hair hung down her back in a single braid. Lily had assured her that her hair was perfect for this style, and had encouraged her to leave a few strands loose. She fussed with them now, a sure sign that she was nervous.

The truth was, Maddie didn't need to work. Her parents had died suddenly while on a river cruise in Europe, victims of a virulent strain of food poisoning that had affected everyone on the boat. Her parents and three others had died. In an effort to minimize publicity, the cruise line had paid a large amount to the estates of the victims. Shortly thereafter, Maddie had realized that she couldn't live in the family home. Memories of happy times spent there with her parents haunted her in every room. Each time she entered the kitchen, she expected to see her mother, and she couldn't bring herself to go into her father's office, where the scent of his cigars still lingered. Real estate had been at an all-time high, and her father's financial consultant advised her to sell the home. As a result, she had more money than she ever dreamed she would have, but being rich was no consolation. No amount of money could replace her parents, and it became a matter of pride to be self-supporting. Irrational perhaps, but she felt strongly about it, and this recent setback had done nothing to change her mind. She checked her appearance one last time and headed downtown.

* * *

“Good morning, David.”

The concierge smiled when he spotted Maddie. “There you are, my girl. I heard about CCA.” He glanced up at the clock above the elevators. It was well past her usual arrival time. “I take it you were caught up in that.”

Maddie was touched at his concern. “I was, yes. But after the initial shock wore off, I realized that accounting wasn't really for me.” She stepped aside as someone asked him for directions.

“So tell me, what are you going to do now?” The observant eyes didn't miss much. She wore a flared cape over slim slacks that were tucked into tall boots.

“That’s partly why I’m here.” She gestured to the corner of the lobby where the smoke shop used to be. “I’m hoping to rent that little shop for a couple of months.” She raised an eyebrow in question. “Do you think the powers that be would consider it?”

The concierge frowned. “The smoke shop? I don’t know. All I know is that the Drummonds didn’t want the tenant to sell cigarettes, and when his lease was up, he refused to stop selling them, so they countered by refusing to renew the lease.” He gave a wry smile. “It made the papers.”

“Huh. That was just before I moved to Calgary.” She tapped her fingers on the desk and looked thoughtfully in the direction of the former shop. “Who should I see about renting it?”

“That would be Mr. Drummond.”

Maddie couldn’t contain her surprise. “Are you serious? Surely he doesn’t take care of the rentals. He must have someone who does that.”

David shrugged. “Those are my instructions. Hey, didn’t I see you talking to him yesterday?”

“Yes, but I didn’t know it was him at the time. I was making some silly comment about liking the revolving door.”

David grinned. “He’ll have enjoyed that. He fought to keep the door in place.”

“Did he?” Maddie glanced at the door and then back at the concierge. “Maybe he’ll remember me.”

David wiggled his eyebrows. “Oh I don’t think there’s any question about that.”

Maddie laughed. “Thanks, David. You know how to make a girl feel special.” She turned to walk away, then turned back. “I’ll let you know how I make out, okay?”

Chapter Three

As the elevator approached the top floor, Maddie took in a long, steadying breath. By the time the doors opened, she was smiling and composed.

The reception area for Drummond Enterprises was discreetly elegant. Brass letters mounted on the wall behind the reception desk spelled out the company name.

Maddie had taken the time to Google Drummond Enterprises last night. The company had been started in the 1940s and '50s by Chase Drummond's grandfather. According to reports, the man had a nose for oil, a skill which he passed on to his son, who had gone on to multiply the family fortunes. The present CEO of Drummond Enterprises, Chase Drummond, had continued his father's practice of diversification. It seemed that the company had a stake in virtually every facet of the oil business. As a result, they were one of the most successful privately held companies in the province of Alberta.

An attractive receptionist greeted her with a smile. "May I help you?"

"I'd like to see Chase Drummond, please." Maddie knew that it was unlikely he would see her without an appointment, but she had to try.

"Is Mr. Drummond expecting you?" The receptionist's gaze darted to a young girl sitting in the reception area, then came back to rest on Maddie.

"No, he isn't." She watched the receptionist key in something on her computer. "My name is Maddie LaRocque. I understand that Mr. Drummond handles rentals in the building. We met yesterday."

Was that a flicker of interest on the receptionist's face? Maddie wasn't sure.

"Mr. Drummond is in a meeting right now, but you're welcome to wait if you wish."

"Thank you, I think I will." Maddie walked over to the waiting area and sank down in one of the comfortable chairs. The young girl looked up, and Maddie could tell the child was going to be a beauty when she grew up. Coppery red hair hung down from a straight part, and eyes the colour of caramel looked at her gravely.

The child closed the magazine she had been reading, but Maddie noticed that she marked her

place. “Are you waiting too?” the girl asked.

“Yes. I suppose it was foolish to show up without an appointment, but I thought I’d try.”

“He’s a very busy man.” The young girl let out a resigned sigh. “He wasn’t expecting me either. There was a gas leak at school, and they evacuated us.” She pulled out a cell phone and looked at it. “I called my uncle, and he sent Declan to get me. We’re going to have lunch together.”

“That should be fun, but you’ll have a long wait.”

“I don’t mind. My uncle takes me to the neatest places, and in the meantime, I can read my magazine.”

Maddie tilted her head. The girl was reading *Marie Claire*. “You like fashion magazines?”

The child’s smile lit up the reception area. “I read them every chance I get. There’s so much to learn if I’m going to make it in the fashion industry.” She opened the magazine.

Maddie had to work to keep a straight face. “I understand it’s a very competitive business. What part of it interests you?”

“I’d like to get into design.” She looked intently at an ad for a couture dress, and her small finger traced the lines. “I want to design clothes that people can actually wear.”

“You mean like Donna Karan?”

“I wish.” The eyes that looked at Maddie were surprisingly mature. “I’d love to be as good as her some day.”

“I think she’s fantastic.” Maddie settled back, aware that the girl was studying her.

“I like your outfit.”

The remark made Maddie smile. “Thank you. You know, my roommate is in the fashion business. She has a silk-screening studio out by the airport. For the first few years, she concentrated on producing fabrics, but this year she’s branched into designing and has come up with a line of resort wear.” She glanced at her watch. “As a matter of fact, she’s showing a few of her pieces at the monthly fashion show at Draper’s. You know, the store just down the street.”

The young girl edged closer to the edge of her seat. “Are you going?”

Maddie gave her a wry smile. “Afraid not; I have some other business after this. But I saw the

show last month, and her stuff was really popular.”

“What’s her name?”

“Lily Hsu.”

“Lily Sue?”

“H-S-U.” Maddie corrected the girl gently. “Her father was born in Taiwan.” She stuck out a hand. “My name is Maddie, by the way.”

“I’m Annie.” The girl shook hands. “Annie Campbell.”

“And Mr. Drummond is your uncle?” This must be the ten-year-old Chase Drummond had mentioned last night. She’d been more accurate than she realized when she’d said that ten was the new thirty. This child was definitely mature beyond her years.

“Yes.” Annie sighed. “I wish he would hurry up.”

A man came hurrying out from the offices and spoke to the receptionist. “Marilyn, could you please get maintenance up here? One of the faucets in the men’s rest room won’t turn off.”

“Right away.” The man walked away, and the receptionist spoke into her mouthpiece, nodding as she listened to the other side of the conversation.

Annie slid off her chair and placed her magazine carefully on the coffee table. “I’m going to go to the restroom,” she announced. Her fingers lingered on the magazine. “Don’t let anyone take my magazine, okay?”

“I’ll guard it.” Maddie watched the child walk down the hallway. Annie was so different from Allan’s son, Connor. Whereas Connor’s dyslexia had caused him to be insecure and a bit defensive, Annie was quite possibly the most self-possessed child she’d ever met.

She picked up the magazine and was starting to leaf through it when the elevator pinged. A man stepped out, carrying a worn canvas tote bag, and suddenly all the oxygen was sucked from the room. Either the accounting office had never needed a maintenance call or she had missed it, because she certainly would have remembered this man. From the scuffed work boots to his sandy hair, she took in every inch of him in a few seconds and liked what she saw.

He strode confidently to the reception desk and motioned toward the back. “Back there, right?” His voice went perfectly with the rest of him. It was a bit raspy, as though he’d been too long in the

cold outside air, and yet she suspected that was his normal sound. She wasn't quite sure how a few words could unleash a flood of desire, but they did. Maybe she'd been buttoned up too long, she thought, as he disappeared through a set of doors she hadn't noticed before.

Maddie stared after him for several long seconds. It wasn't possible to be attracted to a man this quickly. She knew that, and yet the sight and sound of him was indelibly imprinted on her brain. The long, lean legs encased in faded jeans that had seen better days, the strong forearms sprinkled with blonde hair below the rolled-up sleeves of a faded denim shirt. The one- or two-day old beard that gave him a wild, edgy, sexy look. She was surprised that he was allowed to work here, looking like that and yet, based on the self-assured way he carried himself, the question of his shaving habits probably never entered the picture. What would that beard feel like against her skin? Would it tickle as his mouth claimed hers, or would it be rough, tormenting her sweetly as his lips trailed down her body?

“Excuse me, Miss LaRocque?”

Startled, Maddie needed a moment to regain her composure. The receptionist was looking at her oddly. “Mr. Drummond's secretary just called. Something's come up, and he's going to be at least an hour longer, perhaps more. But he promises that he will meet with you if you're willing to wait.”

Maddie glanced at her watch. “I appreciate that, thank you. In the meantime I have something to take care of in the building, so I'll go do that and then come back.”

Annie appeared as she was picking up her bag, and the receptionist relayed a message from her uncle.

“Okay.” The girl seemed accustomed to waiting. She walked over to Maddie and held up her iPhone. “I Googled your friend's fashion show.” She showed Maddie the screen. “Is that her?”

Maddie looked at the familiar face, framed by some of Lily's most popular fabrics. “Yes, that's Lily.”

Annie stared at the image on the screen. “She's beautiful.”

“Yes, she is. Listen, I have some business a few floors down, but I'll be back. See you later, okay?”

“Okay.” Annie settled in to wait.

* * *

Maddie was grateful that the Human Resources department of CCA Accounting was separate from the general offices. She had nothing against her co-workers, but there wasn't much left to say, and she wanted to pick up her cheque with the least possible fuss.

The company had generously paid her until the end of this week plus the two weeks separation pay, as required by provincial law. It was a bit more than she had expected; she tucked the cheque into her purse and left with no hard feelings.

The waiting area was empty when she returned to the floor housing Drummond Enterprises. Maybe Chase Drummond had completed his business earlier than anticipated. Maddie went to the reception desk and waited for Marilyn to complete a call.

“Do you know where Annie is?” she asked.

The receptionist's gaze went to the chair Annie had occupied for the past hour. “No.” She tapped a pen against her teeth as though that would jog her memory. “She went to the restroom, then came back.” She looked up. “You were still here then, weren't you?”

Maddie nodded.

“After that, I'm not sure.” She looked around as though Annie might materialize out of thin air. “Mr. Drummond is not going to be happy about this.”

Maddie looked at the coffee table in the waiting area. “I think she's gone out. Her magazine is gone, and she seemed attached to it.”

The receptionist reached for the phone but Maddie stalled her. “Just a moment. I think I might know where she is.”

“Really?” Marilyn turned hopeful eyes on her. “Where?”

“I think she may have gone to a fashion show over at Draper's. We were talking about it earlier.”

The receptionist looked blank. “A fashion show?”

“Yes. Annie is fascinated with the fashion business.” Maddie thought quickly and pulled out her

cell phone. "Give me a number where I can reach you. I'll run down there now and look for her. If she's there, I'll call you right away."

The receptionist adjusted her earpiece, her other hand hovering over the keypad that controlled the phones. "I guess that would be okay. It will only be a couple of minutes, right?"

Maddie nodded. "Five minutes, tops. It's up to you of course, but I'm quite sure she's there, and you won't have to bother Mr. Drummond."

"Okay then, and thanks." She was visibly relieved. They exchanged cell phone numbers, and Maddie went back to the bank of elevators and was soon en route to the ground floor.

"David." She stopped for a moment at the concierge desk. "Did you see Annie Drummond go out a while ago?" She paused. "Sorry, I mean Annie Campbell."

"Sure did." He looked down at some notes. "Fourteen minutes ago. Came out of the elevator and was out the front door quick as you please. She's a bright little thing, that one, but I was wondering about her being alone, so I wrote down the time."

"Did you notice which way she went?"

"To the right is my guess. She went out the set of doors to the right of the revolving door."

"Thanks, David." Maddie was outside and headed for the crosswalk in seconds. Fortunately, she knew where to go for the fashion show and took the escalator to the second floor.

Annie's flame-coloured hair made her easy to spot. She had managed to find a seat at the end of the second row, and was gazing raptly at the fashions when Maddie arrived. The shows were popular but informal, and Maddie grabbed a folding chair and placed it beside the young girl.

Annie didn't look surprised to see her. "I think Lily is next," she whispered, her voice tense and excited. "Her clothes are second to last."

"I'll be right back. Hold my chair, okay?" Maddie stood up and walked away from the spectators and the music.

"Marilyn," she said into the phone. "She's here at Draper's, she's fine."

"Thank you for doing this. I'll have to have a talk with Mr. Drummond about my responsibilities when Annie comes to wait for him. She's never run off before."

Maddie thought that was an excellent idea, but didn't comment. "Listen, Marilyn. I thought I'd

take Annie for coffee when this is over.” She gave an embarrassed laugh. “Okay, the coffee is for me, but I thought we’d go to that little place next door. Annie can have hot chocolate or something like that.”

“Sounds good. Thanks again, Maddie.”

“You’re welcome.” Maddie looked back at Annie, who was watching the models like a veteran of the runway shows. “She’s really enjoying herself. I’ll see you later.”

She sat down beside Annie and watched the models parading down the runway in Lily’s clothes. As usual, Lily’s astute business sense had been right on when she decided to start manufacturing resort wear. Her designs were bold and vibrant, and it was obvious that the models enjoyed wearing them. Maddie had as much fun watching Annie’s reaction as she did admiring the outfits.

The show drew to a close about ten minutes later, and Lily came running out to see them, not much taller than Annie even in extravagantly high heels.

“I didn’t expect to see you here!” She gave Maddie a quick kiss and drew back to look at Annie. “Hello,” she said, sticking out her hand. “I’m Lily Hsu.”

“I’m Annie Campbell. Your clothes are amazing. I hope to be a designer one day.”

“Excellent.” She shot a curious look at Maddie. “I thought I knew most of Maddie’s friends, but I haven’t heard her mention you.”

“Oh, we just met.” Annie smiled up at Maddie. “She was waiting to see my uncle.”

Lily’s eyebrows shot up. “Your uncle?”

Maddie stepped in. “Chase Drummond. Apparently I have to see him about renting the space, but he’s in a long meeting, and we came over here to pass some time.”

Lily nodded as though this made sense. “I see. And what are you going to do now?”

“I haven’t asked Annie yet, but I thought we’d go to that little specialty coffee place next door. I didn’t have any coffee this morning and I could really use some.” She looked down at the young girl. “What do you say? Could you go for a hot chocolate?”

Annie nodded. “That would be nice. I’d better call my uncle’s office and tell them where I am.”

Lily acknowledged a compliment from one of the departing spectators then turned back to Maddie and Annie. “I have a few things to do here, but I’ll try to join you. Don’t wait for me

though.” She paused and looked at Maddie. “If I get tied up, I’ll call you, and if you leave, you call me, okay?”

“That’s a deal.”

Chapter Four

Annie studied the chalkboard menu, eyes wide with delight. Maddie assumed that her uncle took her to more traditional restaurants. Every second table seemed to be occupied by someone with a laptop, and many of the others were engrossed in their iPhones.

“What would you like?” she asked the youngster.

Annie became uncharacteristically shy. “Could I have a chai please? I’ve never had one before and I’ve been dying to try one.”

Maddie hesitated. She’d never tried one herself, but she couldn’t see that it would do the child any harm. “Why not?” she said brightly. “I’m going to have a latte.”

They were soon settled at a table by the window. It was obvious to Maddie that Annie was trying to contain her excitement. She sipped at her drink, and Maddie’s heart expanded to see the happiness on the child’s face.

“It’s good,” she said and took another sip.

“I’m glad you like it. I’ve never actually had one, myself.”

“Would you like to try?” Annie turned the cup around and nudged it across the table.

“I think I would. Would you like to try my latté?”

“No thanks.” She watched expectantly as Maddie tried the chai.

“You’re right, it is good,” she said, surprised. “Now I see what all the fuss is about.” She returned the cup to Annie and shrugged out of her cape. “So you liked Lily’s clothes?”

“They were wonderful. And to think that she does the silk screening, as well.” She sipped thoughtfully at her drink. “We had a demonstration of silk screening at school, but it was just lettering on a t-shirt.” She looked at Maddie, eyes free of guile. “Does Lily ever give tours of her shop? I’d love to see it some time.”

Maddie tried to remember if her roommate had ever mentioned a tour. “I don’t think so.”

Annie tried to hide her disappointment. “Maybe some day. I have a lot of other things to learn, I know that.” A slight frown creased her brow. “Last night my uncle asked me what I want for Christmas and when I told him he just looked at me as though I was crazy.”

Maddie didn't know if she should go there, but she wanted to know. "What did you want?"

"A sewing machine." She gave her head what could only be called a frustrated shake. "I have to be able to sew if I'm ever going to become a designer."

Maddie was surprised. She would have thought that Chase would be delighted to have the problem solved. "What did he say?"

Annie thought for a moment. "He was going to say something, but then Cynthia came out with one of those phony laughs and said I couldn't possibly want a sewing machine, that I'm far too young." Tears started to well up in her eyes, and she brushed them back impatiently. "I'll bet she doesn't even know how to use one herself."

"Who is Cynthia? Your housekeeper?"

"No. She's my uncle's girlfriend." She stared into her chai. "She never pays any attention to me. How does she know whether I can use a sewing machine or not?" She shrugged, and the helpless gesture wrenched at Maddie's heart. "Anyway, Uncle Chase said, 'Don't worry, we'll come up with something'." She sipped at the chai. "This is really good. Thank you."

Maddie took a moment to recover her aplomb. "Have you ever done any sewing before?"

Annie nodded. "That's what makes it so unfair. I know how to work one. We had a play at school, and I helped out with the costumes." She made a funny face. "It was plain sewing. Nothing glamorous like the fashion show today, but I do know how a sewing machine runs. Mrs. Z. showed us what to do."

"Mrs Z.?"

Annie giggled. "We call her Mrs. Z. because her last name is really long and hard to pronounce. But she sure knows how to sew."

"Sounds as if you like her."

Annie acknowledged the comment with a quick nod, and then looked out the window, her thoughts somewhere else. When she finally spoke her voice was low. "She sticks up for me when the other kids make fun of me and call me names."

Maddie couldn't imagine why anyone would make fun of this delightful child, but then it had

been a long time since she was in school. Things had changed a lot.

“What do they say?”

The child turned around, her eyes bright with tears. Maddie could see that she was fighting to hold herself together. “They call me Little Orphan Annie.” She very deliberately took a napkin from the dispenser, folded it once and dabbed at her eyes. “They say all I need is curly hair and I could be in the movies.”

Maddie’s throat closed up as she thought of what the child must have endured.

“I’m an orphan too.” She didn’t know where the words came from; they just popped out. She picked up her cup to cover her own confusion.

“You are?” Annie looked at her as though she didn’t quite believe her ears.

“Uh-huh. It was five years ago, so I was a lot older than you, but I don’t think it matters how old you are, it still hurts.”

Annie nodded in agreement, her eyes locked on Maddie’s. “My father died about two years ago in an accident on an oil rig. He was what’s called a trouble-shooter.” She had both hands on her cup of chai and rotated it back and forth between her palms. “My mom died eight months and twelve days later. I saw that in the paper, and for some reason it stuck in my head.” She inhaled slowly. “The newspaper said that the cancer hit her so quickly she didn’t get a chance to grieve.” She looked up. “That doesn’t seem fair, does it?”

Maddie could only shake her head.

She was still sitting, staring into her cup, when Annie’s small hand covered hers. “I’m sorry I brought this up. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

Maddie raised her head and looked into the amazing eyes of this woman/child. Most of the adults she knew would have crumpled when faced with the amount of grief this young girl had endured, and yet here she was, doing the comforting.

“I’m glad you told me,” she said with a soft smile. “Too many people refuse to acknowledge their grief, as though ignoring it will make it go away. They pack it up and shove it away in some dark corner, hoping that they never stumble on it again. But I think that’s wrong. I think you should remember your parents every day, and not be afraid to be sad when you think of them. You’ll

always miss them, but in time it won't hurt so much. One day, happy memories will come along, and eventually they will crowd out the unhappy ones."

Annie looked at her quietly for a moment, as though trying to memorize her face.

"Can we be friends?" she asked finally.

Maddie opened her arms, and the child walked into them. "Absolutely," she said. She looked over Annie's shoulder and saw Lily approaching. "And here comes number three."

Annie pulled back. "Number three?"

"Yes. Lily's here. We'll be a gang of three friends."

Lily sat down with an exaggerated groan. She brought with her the fresh, crisp air of outside and her own personal scent, the ingredients of which she refused to divulge. "My feet are killing me." She reached down and massaged her arches.

"Shall I get you something?" Annie rose, eager to be of assistance.

"That would be great," Lily said. "I'd love some chai."

"That's what I had!" Annie squealed her approval and dashed off to the counter.

"You just made her day," said Maddie, watching as Annie paid with a credit card. She brought the tea back, set it in front of Lily then turned to Maddie. "Did you tell Lily that she's part of our gang?"

Lily rolled her eyes. "Gang? What is this, *West Side Story*?"

"No." Maddie winked at Annie. "Just three girls supporting each other." She changed the subject. "So how did the show go?"

"There was a buyer in the audience from a boutique in Edmonton. I didn't know she was there, that's what took me so long."

"They don't usually go to showings at retail outlets, do they?"

"No, but apparently she was in town and heard about the show and as they say, the rest is history." She paused. "She wants an exclusive for Edmonton, and I'm thinking about giving it to her. My product would be lost in among all the designers in the large stores, and this would be a great way to experiment, for both of us."

"Sounds like you've already decided."

“Yes, I suppose I have.” She reached for her purse and turned to Annie, who had been hanging onto every word. “I forgot to pay you for the chai.”

“Oh, no. Please let it be my treat. Maddie paid for me.”

Lily grinned and saluted with her cup. “In that case, thanks!” She closed her eyes and took a sip. “So, Annie. What got you interested in fashion?”

The child thought for a moment. “I think it was when my parents used to go out for the evening. My mother always let me watch her get ready. She had a little makeup table in their bedroom with lights and everything. She’d sit there in her slip and put on her makeup and we’d talk about...oh, about everything. She always had her dress hanging up, and we’d decide what jewelry she was going to wear, and what shoes.” Her eyes took on a dreamy, far-away look. “My mom had a lot of her clothes made and she took me with her a few times when she went for fittings. I was just a kid then, and it seemed like a magical place to me, yet I understood what they were doing.”

Lily touched Annie’s silky hair. “Did you get this beautiful hair from your mother? You can do anything with hair like this.”

“Really? The kids at school make fun of it.”

Lily gave an unladylike snort. “Well they would, wouldn’t they? They’re jealous, that’s all it is.” She pointed to her hair, which was anchored by the ever-present chopsticks. “Can you imagine the ribbing I took with this? They were always telling me I should put it in a pigtail. Either that or they were calling me a Chink. I was born in Vancouver General Hospital for heaven’s sake.” She took a sip of chai. “People can be so stupid.”

“Can I touch it?” Annie edged closer, obviously fascinated by this exotic creature who spoke her mind so bluntly.

“Sure.” Lily reached up and pulled out the chopsticks. “As a matter of fact, it’s starting to feel heavy.” The mass of hair came free, and she rotated her neck, causing her hair to ripple down her back. “That feels so good,” she said, her voice low and throaty. “It feels almost as good as...well, hello there!”

Maddie had seen Lily in just about every situation imaginable, but she’d never seen her react the

way she did when Chase Drummond walked into the coffee shop. Lily Hsu, who was accustomed to commanding the attention of every man with a pulse, was looking at Chase as though she'd never seen a member of the opposite sex before.

“Uncle Chase!” Unaware of the electric undercurrents zinging between her uncle and Lily, Annie jumped up, ran to him and threw her arms around his legs.

Chase acknowledged his niece with a pat on the head, but he kept his gaze on Lily. A shaft of sunlight came through the window, creating dark blue highlights in her hair. For a moment, Maddie thought he was going to reach out and touch it, then he recovered.

He tore his eyes away and nodded to Maddie. “I’m sorry you had to wait so long, but Marilyn did warn you, didn’t she?”

“She did, yes. Please don’t apologize. I didn’t realize I’d have to see you personally to ask about a rental.” She looked at Annie. “We decided to wait here until you were free.”

Annie tugged at his hand. “Sit down, Uncle Chase. Sit down.”

“Oh no, I don’t think so.” He glanced at Lily. “Well, maybe for a minute.” He folded his tall frame into a chair. “So, it looks like you ladies are having a tea party.”

“Can I get you something?” Annie jumped up again.

“No, I don’t think so. I promised to take you out to lunch, remember?” He was looking at Lily as though he’d like to make a meal out of her. “We could all go together.” He shot a quick, questioning glance at Maddie before re-focusing his attention on Lily. “I don’t think we’ve met.”

“Lily Hsu.” She extended a small, elegant hand. “Nice to meet you, Chase.” She stood up abruptly. “I’m afraid I can’t join you though.” She glanced at her roommate, but Maddie couldn’t read her expression. “I have appointments all afternoon.”

Chase stood. “I’m sorry to hear that.” He motioned to her chair. “You’re not going to finish your tea?”

“No.” Lily almost knocked her chair over in her haste to leave. She paused for a moment and made eye contact with Annie. “We’ll see each other again, okay? Maybe you could come out to the studio some time.”

“Oh, I’d love that!”

Lily nodded. “Maddie will set it up.” She looked at Chase for a fleeting moment, and Maddie thought she caught a hint of sadness in her roommate’s expression. “Goodbye.” She made her way to the door.

“Did you hear that? Lily says I can go to her studio.” Annie was too excited to notice that her uncle wasn’t listening. He was watching Lily as she walked to the corner then crossed to the other side. Maddie had no idea where her roommate was going; it looked like she was running away.

Chapter Five

“Shall we go?” Chase smiled down at Annie. “I thought we’d go to that Italian place today.

What do you say?”

Maddie could have told him that anywhere would have been okay with Annie, but for once she managed to keep her opinion to herself.

“Okay with you?” He turned to Maddie.

“I don’t want to interfere,” she said.

“Come with us.” Annie grabbed her hand.

“Yes, come with us. We can talk business over lunch, if you don’t mind.” Chase glanced at his watch. “It looks like our board meeting is going to carry on after lunch.” His eyes glittered with barely concealed excitement. “Our chief geologist brought us some exciting news this morning.”

Maddie knew very little about the oil industry except that Calgary was the business epicentre of Canadian oil production. The “oil patch,” as it was often called, drew workers from all over the country, driving rents sky-high. Tourists often complained that almost every motel in the province had a No Vacancy sign out.

“Okay, let’s do it.” Maddie slipped into her cape and joined Annie on the sidewalk. A few degrees below freezing, the air felt much colder, and they walked briskly the block to the restaurant.

“Mr. Drummond.” A short man with a long white apron met them at the door. “Ladies,” he intoned with a slight bow and showed them to a table. “Franco will be here in a moment to take your order, but I can tell you that our specials today are spaghetti carbonara and veal marsala.” He motioned to the bottle of Pellegrino on the table. “Shall I pour?”

Chase nodded. “For me as well, Tony. I have an important meeting this afternoon and can’t afford to muddy my thinking by having a drink.” He watched with undisguised pleasure as the head waiter poured some San Pellegrino in a stemmed glass for Annie, then for Maddie and himself.

Annie held the stemmed glass comfortably, and Maddie caught the look of pride on her face as she lifted it to drink. “Thanks for coming with us, Maddie. This is fun.”

Maddie lifted her glass in a silent salute. “Thank *you*.”

Chase leaned forward, all business. “So, Maddie. I understand you wanted to talk to me about a rental? Before you say anything, I apologize for bringing up business before we’ve even eaten.” He gave her a wry grin. “In the movies they always wait, but I’m afraid I don’t have that luxury today.”

“I understand. I’m interested in renting the little shop in the lobby. It’s a perfect size for what I have in mind.” She decided to lay her cards on the table. “Trouble is, I’d only need it for a couple of months.” She watched him for a reaction, but got none. “From now until the end of the year, to be precise.”

The waiter arrived and took their orders, giving Chase time to consider her proposal. “Is this rental for yourself? When we met yesterday, I got the impression that you were employed somewhere in the building. I heard you say hello to David.”

Maddie felt a goofy smile transform her face. “Yeah, David. He’s one of my favourite things about the building. I met him a few days after I started working there. That would be about six months ago.”

“So you haven’t worked there long?”

Time to come clean. “I don’t work there any more. I got laid off yesterday.” She frowned to herself. “I guess that’s the way to describe it. The company I worked for lost an account, and I was one of the team members.” She drew her hand across her throat. “Goodbye, Maddie.”

He nodded. “CCT Accounting. I heard about that.” He thought for a moment. “I’ve rented the space to someone else.”

Maddie’s dreams crashed and burned at his words.

“But they’re not taking over until the New Year.” He sat back in his chair and studied her. “What type of business did you have in mind?”

Maddie shot a quick glance at Annie, who had been watching the exchange with interest. “I was talking to someone yesterday who didn’t know what to buy a relative for Christmas, and I had the idea of a gift buying service, coupled with gift wrapping. I think I could do well.”

He nodded vigorously. "I know you could. All I'd have to do is mention it at the Oilmen's Club, and you'd have more business than you could handle."

The waiter placed a plate of spaghetti carbonara in front of her, but the luscious smell barely registered. "Would you really do that?"

"Of course he would!" Annie bounced excitedly in her seat. "Wouldn't you, Uncle Chase?"

"Thank you, Franco." He acknowledged the server, checked Annie's plate, and then turned back to Maddie. "I think you have a fan." He looked affectionately at his niece.

"We're a gang," Annie said proudly. "We're a gang of three."

Chase paused, his glass halfway to his mouth. "What is this, *West Side Story*?"

Maddie and Annie looked at each other and laughed out loud.

"What?" Chase raised an eyebrow. "What did I say?"

"That's what Lily said when we told her about the gang. Wait 'til I tell her you said the same thing." Annie expertly twirled her spaghetti. "You'll like her, Uncle Chase. Too bad she had to leave."

Chase flushed; Maddie suspected that wasn't something that happened very often. "Yes, too bad." He turned back to Maddie. "There will be some paperwork to complete, but that sounds fine. When do you want to set up?"

"Yesterday." She held his gaze. "Thank you, Chase. I appreciate this."

"You're welcome." He cut into his veal. "Marilyn will make sure you get to see the right people, and they will co-ordinate with the building superintendent regarding access."

Maddie thought of the man she'd seen earlier and her heart did a little flip flop in her chest. "Right," she said.

"Get some business cards printed up and a few colourful flyers. Between me and my top executives, we belong to just about every men's club in town. I play handball several days a week, and there's a bulletin board in there, as well as at the gyms we frequent." He seemed to be enjoying himself. "This is just like starting out all over again, but you don't have much time to get the word out, so you'll need all the help you can get."

Maddie put down her fork. "At the risk of sounding blunt, why are you helping me? I wasn't

even sure you'd let me have the space, let alone help me out.”

His expression softened. “Two reasons. First of all, Annie likes you and she's an excellent judge of character.”

Annie's head bobbed up and down, her mouth full of spaghetti.

“And secondly, because David speaks highly of you. I spoke to him before I came over here today, and he told me you're one of the few people who ever bothered to learn his name, and that you say hello to him every day.” He looked at her steadily. “I like that.”

“Thank you.”

Annie wiped her mouth with her napkin. “This is so cool. I'll get to see you all the time.”

“Yes, you will.” Maddie grinned at the youngster, but her mind was spinning. There was so much to do; it was almost overwhelming.

“What will you do when the Christmas season is over?” Chase poured some more sparkling water.

“I haven't thought that far ahead, but I'll find something.” She finished the last of her spaghetti.

“Now isn't a good time to be looking for a new job anyway what with the holidays and all.”

“I'd have to agree with you there.” He toyed with his fork, then set it deliberately on his plate.

“Your friend, Lily. What type of work does she do?”

Annie couldn't keep quiet any longer. “She's a clothes designer! I saw some of her designs at a fashion show.”

Chase looked from his niece to Maddie, a puzzled frown on his face.

“There was a fashion show at Draper's,” volunteered Maddie. “Annie and I had been talking about it, and I told her that my friend was going to be there. Actually, she owns a very successful silk screening studio and she's recently expanded into fashion.”

“And you know her well?” Colour crept up his neck again.

“We're roommates. We went to high school together and then we both went on to study at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. Lily took Applied Arts. I didn't know what interested me so I did what everyone does in that case. I was going for my BA.”

“And you ended up in accounting?”

“I’m putting that down to temporary insanity.” Maddie shrugged her shoulders. “It’s a fine occupation. After all, we all need accountants, but I didn’t realize how much I disliked it until yesterday.”

He chuckled and looked up at their server, who was clearing the plates. “Dessert anyone? Or coffee?” He looked from Annie to Maddie.

“Not for me, thanks,” said Maddie. “I don’t usually eat this much at lunch.”

“Me neither.” Annie had managed to finish her whole meal. “But thank you.”

“The cheque please, Franco.” Chase leaned across and placed his hand on Annie’s. “So you’ll take care of my girl when it’s time for her to visit Lily’s studio?”

Maddie had been wondering when he’d bring Lily back into the conversation. “Yes, I will.” She stopped to think. “I’m going to be quite busy for the next little while. Would it be okay if Lily picks up Annie?”

Chase’s eyes danced. “Well, I don’t know...”

“Uncle Chase!” Annie knew her uncle well.

“Yes, of course.” He put on a serious face. “But you have to give me advance warning, young lady. None of this running off without telling anyone.”

Annie nodded soberly. “Yes, Uncle Chase.”

Maddie had been right. Not much got past Chase Drummond.

Chapter Six

Maddie was busy making lists when Lily got home from work. She kicked off her shoes, snagged a bottle of water from the fridge and climbed up on a stool across from Maddie. They'd often joked about needing a step stool, but Lily always managed.

"I'm tired," she said, unscrewing the top and taking a long drink. "It's been a long day." She glanced at Maddie's lists. "I see you got the place."

"Yes." Maddie could tell there was something wrong, but she knew Lily well enough not to push. She shuffled the papers and tried to push down her mounting panic at the amount of work to be done. "I may have bitten off more than I can chew this time."

Lily reached for the lists and studied them for a few moments. "When were you planning to open for business?"

Maddie watched her friend carefully. Lily's normal "take no prisoners" attitude seemed to have deserted her. She couldn't help but wonder if it had anything to do with her reaction to Chase Drummond.

"I think around the fifteenth of November. That will give me time to get some printing done, put up some flyers, get in supplies and get some arrangements in place with a few stores.

Lily tapped the lists, deep in thought. "Do you think you'll have any problems when it comes to money? What if someone tries to stiff you?"

Maddie had considered that. "I don't think that's going to happen." She gave a short laugh. "This may be a large city, but it's a small town if you know what I mean. The people who ask me to shop for them will be so grateful they'll fall all over themselves to pay me. Besides, they all know each other in the oil business. With Chase Drummond as my landlord, they wouldn't dare give me a bad time. Their reputations would be shredded."

Lily toyed with the water bottle. "Are you going to hire anyone? This could be a very popular service, and in case you haven't noticed, there's only one of you."

Maddie shook her head. "I think I can get away with having people contact me on my cell, at least in the beginning. They can either come to the shop or I'll go to them if necessary. I think I'll

play it by ear.”

“You can always hire someone closer to Christmas if it comes to that.” Lily removed the chopsticks from her hair and pulled a few strands around to the front, winding them around her finger.

“What did you think of Chase?” she said finally. She wouldn’t meet Maddie’s eyes, but at least she had mentioned him. It was progress of a sort.

Maddie took a moment to collect her thoughts. “He was amazing, actually.”

Lily’s head came up. She seemed startled.

“He’s going to help me with getting out the word.” Maddie couldn’t help but smile as she recalled Chase’s generous offer. “He says he’ll tell all his oil buddies about my service, and he even offered to put some flyers up in the gym. And when I went to sign the papers for the shop, I couldn’t believe the price they quoted me. I mean, it was next to nothing. I thought they’d made a mistake but they said no, Mr. Drummond had personally set the price.”

Lily’s keen business instincts took over. “Why would he do that?”

“I asked him.”

“Really?” Lily offered a slight smile. “That was gutsy. What did he say?”

“He seems to think that because Annie likes me I must be okay.” She hesitated.

“There’s something else. What?”

“It’s about David. You know, the concierge in the building; I’ve mentioned him to you. He likes the fact that I got to know David by name, and that I say hello to him every day.”

“Interesting.” Lily pulled the strand of hair across her lips. Her gaze drifted to the window, where snowflakes fell against the glass. “There’s something about him…” Her voice drifted off.

Maddie waited for Lily to continue but when she remained silent, decided to jump in. “I noticed your reaction to him when he came in.”

Lily glanced at her out of the corner of her eye. “Was it so obvious?”

“Not to him, but I know you and I’ve never seen you like that before.”

Lily’s eyes took on a faraway look. “When he walked in, something passed between us, you

know?”

“Hello! Jeez, Lily, a person would have to be in a coma not to notice the sparks between the two of you.” She sat forward. “Why did you run?”

“I didn’t run.” It was a half-hearted attempt at denial.

“Then what do you call it? It sure looked like running to me. The man stood and watched you race across the street as though somebody had ripped out his heart.”

“You see? That’s what I mean!” Lily released the strand of hair she’d been playing with and flicked it over her shoulder.

“Lily…” Maddie shook her head. “What are you talking about?”

“He doesn’t know me!” She clenched her hand into a small fist and pounded it against her chest. “They never do. They see an attractive Asian woman and they get all these fantasies.” She held up a hand. “Don’t bother denying it, Maddie, it’s true. Many of them think an exotic looking woman is a status symbol.” Her dark eyes blazed with anger. “And the rest of them think you’re going to be submissive.”

“You? Submissive? That’s a laugh.” Maddie smiled, but Lily was still vibrating with anger.

“Listen, my friend. You must have your reasons for disliking Chase, but I don’t think he fits any of those stereotypes.”

Lily’s head came up, and there were tears in her eyes. “I didn’t say I don’t like him. I wish it was that easy. But don’t you see? How could he be interested in me from one look? That kind of stuff only happens in books, and I don’t believe it there, either.”

Maddie’s thoughts went to the man she’d seen in Chase’s office yesterday. It hadn’t mattered that he wore khakis while Chase wore tailored suits, or that he worked in maintenance while Chase was the CEO of an oil exploration company. The attraction had hit her like a bolt of lightning, and he hadn’t even noticed her. She forced herself to re-focus on Lily’s problem.

She’d never seen her roommate this emotional. Lily had dated in Vancouver, picking and choosing among the many men who vied for her attention. But as to any relationships since she’d moved to Calgary two years ago, Maddie had no idea. In the six months she’d been in Calgary she couldn’t recall Lily going out once. She’d cited business pressures and lack of suitable men as the

reason, but Maddie was beginning to wonder if there was more to the story than what Lily had told her. Perhaps something would come out if they talked about Chase some more.

“So let’s get this straight,” Maddie began. “You like the look of Chase. There’s an attraction there that’s not just one-sided. You know nothing about him or his motives, and yet you’ve made some sort of arbitrary decision that you don’t want to get to know him.” She made a big show of nodding her head. “Of course, that makes sense. I should have realized.”

Lily said nothing, which was very unusual. Tears ran down her face, and she dabbed at them impatiently, then slid off the stool and walked to stand in front of the window. Snow swirled against the building, glittering as the light caught it. Lily watched it without really seeing it.

“I met him a few months after I arrived here,” she said, her words low and urgent as though she had to get them out before she changed her mind. “He was a wheat broker.”

Maddie didn’t know such a job existed, but she didn’t want to interrupt.

“His name was Randall.” She gave a short, mirthless laugh. “Not Randy. He hated the idea of being called that.” She sucked in a quick breath of air. “Anyway, we met and started going out. After a few months, it was getting serious...at least I thought so. He’d been taking me with him to business dinners, cocktail parties, that sort of thing.” She paused. “Did you know that Canada sells a lot of wheat to China? Yes? Well, I learned all about that, nodding and smiling through interminable dinners.”

Her narrative seemed to lose momentum as she watched the changing patterns of the swirling snow. Then she shook herself and continued.

“One weekend we were invited to a ranch down by High River. I bought all the right clothes.” A smile of remembrance lightened her features. “I even bought a pair of cowboy boots. Anyway, Randall had been out by the barbecue pit talking with the other men but I ran back to the room for something, and when I returned, he was off to the side, deep in conversation with another man. They were standing on the other side of a trellis. I can still see it; it was covered with yellow climbing roses...” Her voice faded again, and Maddie ached for her friend, knowing how difficult it must be to tell the story. Lily crossed her arms in front of her chest, hugging herself. “I was walking across the lawn when I heard Randall mention my name. I thought he was singing my

praises, the way he always seemed to do when we went out with his business contacts. I can still hear his voice. ‘You need to get someone like Lily. Someone who understands how they think. I’ve been doing amazing since I hooked up with her.’

“This other guys says: ‘So she works with you?’”

“‘Hell, no.’ says Randall. ‘I just keep her sweet for when Asians come to town.’”

“Then the other guy says ‘I thought you and Lily were, like a couple.’”

Lily turned to Maddie. “He laughed. I’ll never forget the sound of it. Then he said something about how his parents would react if he brought me home. He then proceeded to tell the other guy about his ‘real’ girlfriend.”

Lily’s eyes were surprisingly dry.

“My God, Lily. What did you do then?”

She lifted her chin a little. “You would have been proud of me. I didn’t smack him, much as I wanted to. I went back to the room we were sharing, took his keys and drove his car back here to Calgary. I left the keys in the car and sent him a text telling him that I’d heard everything he said.”

Chase wasn’t Randall, but it was too soon to get into that conversation. “Good for you,” said Maddie.

She was relieved to see a smile on Lily’s face. “You know what’s funny? My parents would be even more shocked than his if the positions were reversed and I took him home. They’ve lived most of their adult lives in Vancouver, and yet they still expect me to marry a nice Asian boy.”

“Reverse discrimination.” The words slipped out before Maddie could stop them.

“I suppose you’re right.” Lily gave a soft little sigh. “I don’t know why I’m getting all worked up. Chase probably has a girlfriend anyway. A successful guy like that.”

It was as if Annie’s words hung between them in a bubble.

“He does, doesn’t he?” She turned slowly to face Maddie. “Just as well, I suppose. I’m guessing that Annie said something. What was it?”

Maddie tried to recall the conversation. “We were talking about what she wanted for Christmas. She’d told Chase she wanted a sewing machine and she said her uncle’s girlfriend laughed and

said she was too young.” She watched Lily’s reaction. “I got the impression she doesn’t like her very much, if that helps.”

“Not really, but whoever she is, she doesn’t know what she’s talking about. Girls even younger than ten are perfectly capable of running a sewing machine with a little instruction.”

“Will you show her if I explain that to Chase? I know Annie would be thrilled.”

Lily didn’t have to think long. “I’d like that. She’s an adorable kid.” She brightened. “See? You already know what you’re going to buy for your first customer!”

* * *

“Uncle Chase, it’s your move!” Annie frowned impatiently.

He focused at the board, trying to give it his full attention. He’d been having trouble since just before lunch when, with one look, he’d fallen hard for the most intriguing woman he’d ever seen. In his experience, most petite women played up the fact that they were a few inches shorter than normal. But not Lily. From the first glance, he’d been aware of her fierceness, her vitality. He didn’t know how he knew these things, but he had no doubt that she could stand up for herself in any situation and he liked that about her.

Of course it didn’t hurt that she was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. He made a move, but his mind wasn’t on the game.

He’d dated a lot of attractive women, but this one was different. He didn’t know her, and yet something told him that she was ambivalent about her beauty. As a business woman, she’d know that her looks would win her certain advantages, and yet she warred with herself about using her most striking asset. How he’d love to get to know her better.

His friends would laugh at him if he told them how quickly he’d fallen for her. Just last week after a hard-fought battle on the handball court, he’d sat in the steam room with his partner, listening to Greg’s contention that you had to live with a woman for at least a year before you really got to know her. That wouldn’t be necessary with Lily; he’d known that at first sight. And yet in spite of the undeniable attraction that flared between them, she’d run away.

“Uncle Chase, I think we should stop this game. You’re not paying attention.”

Chase looked down at the board. He had no idea what his next move should be, either here or

with the woman who occupied his every thought. “You’re right, Annie. I’m sorry, I’ve had a long day.”

Annie sorted out the pieces, separating them by colour. Chase had learned not to be impatient with her when she insisted in keeping the pieces in separate plastic bags. It was part of their routine, and he watched her with affection.

“So how was your day today?” he asked. They usually discussed this over dinner, but he’d come home later than normal, and she’d already eaten.

“It was wonderful.” She wrinkled her nose. “Except for the part about having to leave school. But that meant I met Maddie, so that was good.” She ran her finger along the self-sealing lunch bags and put everything away in the checkers box. “I liked Lily, too. Know what she said when I told her the kids tease me about my hair?”

Chase leaned forward eagerly. “What?”

“She said they’re just jealous. Did you know she holds her hair up with toothpicks?”

Chase checked to see if she was teasing, but she appeared serious. “Do you mean chopsticks?”

Annie laughed. “Yes, chopsticks. Silly me.” She sobered. “She used to get teased about her hair at school just like me. They told her she should put it in a pigtail, and called her a Chink.”

“I thought she had beautiful hair.”

Annie gave him an odd look. “Me, too. I can hardly wait to see her studio. Maybe the next time the teachers take a professional day, I can ask Maddie to take me.”

“Or I could take you.” Chase couldn’t believe the words had come out of his mouth.

“Would you?” Annie beamed.

“Sure, why not? Now you’d better run up and get into your jammies. I’ll be up in a while to tuck you in.”

“Thanks, Uncle Chase. You’re the best.”

Chase stared into the fire. He wasn’t going to give up on Lily Hsu. He sat back in his favourite chair and thought of how her hair had flashed blue in the sunlight. He wondered how it would feel to run his fingers through it. *Chase Drummond, you’re a fool*, he thought to himself. *You’ll be lucky if she lets you anywhere near her.*

Chapter Seven

“Good morning, Maddie.” David came out from behind his desk and shook her hand. “I hear that Mr. Drummond has rented you the space.”

“Yes.” She laid a hand on his arm. “I’m a bit nervous, to tell you the truth.”

“Not to worry.” He patted her hand and pointed toward the back of the lobby. The chairs and plants which had been in front of the little shop had been moved aside. Anyone entering the lobby would have a clear view of her shop. “What do you think?”

Maddie studied the effect. “I think that’s just about perfect.”

David presented her with a key. “This is for your shop. The door is off to the right. The lock is a bit sticky, but it works. I tried it this morning.”

“Thank you.” They walked back together, and the older man watched while she opened the door.

“I’ll get Daryl to give the lock a shot of WD-40. That will loosen it up.” David showed her the light switches, and how the front of the shop rolled up to create an opening.

Maddie looked around, surprised at the amount of space. “This is larger than I realized; it’s going to be perfect,” she said, opening drawers and checking inside cupboards. She handed him a business card. “And I’d like you to be the first person to have one of my new cards.”

He looked it over and tucked it in his shirt pocket. “I’m honoured. And if you have any extras, drop them by the desk. I’ll be happy to hand them out when you’re not here.” He gave her a sly wink. “A lot of people come into this building every day; they’ll probably ask what’s going on.”

“Thank you, David.” She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. “Now I’m off to buy my gift wrapping supplies.”

* * *

It took several trips before Maddie was satisfied that she had enough gift wrapping supplies to get started. She was well aware that once business got going, she’d have little time to spare.

On the last trip to the stores, she picked up the custom sign she’d had made, several strands of Christmas lights and an equivalent length of plastic garland. The company that created the digital sign had been very helpful, suggesting that she add an illustration of a Christmas gift on the sign

which read *Gift Wrapped for Christmas*. There was a perfect spot right over the opening, and while she'd been measuring the space she'd noticed clips for holding the lights. It looked as though some previous tenant had done the same thing.

“David,” she said, approaching the desk with a string of lights in her hand. “Does the building have a small step ladder I can use?” She indicated the lights. “I'd like to brighten up the corner with these lights.”

The older man hustled across the lobby and opened a door she hadn't noticed before. “Right here,” he said, handing her a small ladder. “I'd like to help you but I have a touch of vertigo. The Doc says it's my inner ear.”

She looked at him, concerned. “I didn't know that, but I'll be fine.” She started removing the lights from the boxes and winding them around the garlands. Her shop would be a bright spot on those grey winter days that were right around the corner.

* * *

Maddie climbed down from the ladder and stepped back to admire her work. She had the lights plugged in so that she could arrange them to their best advantage; they looked bright and cheerful. She moved the ladder along, climbed up again and was reaching for the next hook when her cell phone rang.

Determined not to miss a potential business call, she reached for the phone. The motion unbalanced her and she knew she was going to fall. It was as if it was happening in slow motion and she could do nothing to stop it. She had the presence of mind to drop the garland and clutch at the ladder, but it was no use and she closed her eyes, hoping her landing wouldn't be too undignified.

Her landing was surprisingly comfortable, and when she opened her eyes, she was looking into the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. Blue eyes that crinkled at the edges as they smiled down at her.

She was being held by the building maintenance man, and for one wild moment she thought she'd be quite happy to stay right here in his arms, thank you very much. His face was inches away, smiling down at her, lips twitching as he watched her squirm. His beard was several days old

again, and she ached to reach out and touch it. Maybe he wouldn't notice if she—

“Well,” he said, putting her down slowly. His gaze didn't move from her face. “What have we here?” His voice was husky, the way she remembered, and she swallowed hard. He stepped back to survey her handiwork. “Looks nice, but what is it?”

“I thought you'd know,” she stammered. There was definitely something lacking in the building's communications. Maybe he hadn't been reading his mail.

“Know what?” He seemed amused.

“Know that I was opening my shop.”

He picked up the ladder and smiled at her. “Nope. Nobody ever tells me anything.” He didn't seem the slightest bit upset.

Close up, he was even more attractive than she remembered. Especially his hair. It grew every which way on his head, as though it couldn't make up its mind. Maddie was getting tired of pretty boys who spent more time on their hair than most women. Too bad he was so cheeky.

She would be happy to look at him all day, and he seemed inclined to do the same, but she had things to do. And now that he was here...

“Could you help me finish up here?” She motioned to the ladder. “It's not the sturdiest of ladders, but I'll hold it steady if you could finish hooking the lights in place.”

He examined the ladder more closely. “Is this David's?”

“Yes. Or to be more precise, it belongs to the building. He loaned it to me.” She looked toward the front of the lobby. “He's not here right now.” Now she was babbling.

“I'll make sure it gets replaced with a sturdier one.” He kicked the legs open and climbed up a couple of steps. Strong legs encased in faded blue jeans were right in front of her face, and her throat went dry.

“Are you looking at my butt? I'm not sure whether to be flattered or call Human Resources.”

Maddie pulled back, shocked, and then realized he was laughing at her. He pointed to the garland and wiggled his fingers. “Pass me that, and let's get this done.”

Of course. He had other things to do, and she wasn't on the list. But she'd like to be.

“What about that sign?” The sign was leaning up against the shop, and he tilted his head to read it. “Gift Wrapping? That’s a good idea.”

“I thought so. I’ll also be offering a gift buying service.”

“Another good idea.” He picked up the sign. “Why don’t I hang this for you? Do you have a hammer and nails?”

“No, I wasn’t sure if I’d be allowed to put any nails in the wood.”

“Don’t worry, they’ll never know.” He gave her a grin that curled her toes. “Besides, I’ll use really small nails. Back in a minute.” He disappeared down the stairs that led to the basement. Maddie ran inside her little shop and dug inside her purse, searching for her compact. Her softly braided hair had come loose, framing her face in disobedient wisps. Her cheeks were flushed from working and the sparkle was back in her eyes.

She hadn’t looked this animated in a long time, and it suited her. Nothing like the excitement of a new venture to make a girl come alive. Of course the sudden change had nothing to do with...what was his name? She couldn’t remember.

He came back through the door, whistling as though this were a great adventure.

“Once more into the breach, dear friends.” He set the ladder in place.

“Henry the Fifth,” said Maddie and handed him the sign. “Are you a fan of Shakespeare?”

“Not really,” he mumbled around the nails in his mouth. He hammered them in place. “It just suited the moment.” He made a deep bow. “And now, my lady, is there anything else I can do for you?” For a moment, she thought she saw a flash of desire in those blue eyes, but then it was gone, much to her disappointment.

“Well, I would like to know your name so I can thank you properly.” She held out her hand. “I’m Maddie LaRocque.”

“Delighted to meet you, Maddie LaRocque.” He took her hand and brought it to his lips. Heat shot through Maddie’s veins. “My name is—”

“Uncle Brent!” Caught in the moment, they hadn’t noticed Annie enter the lobby. “You’re back.” She dropped her backpack and leaped into his arms. He twirled her around several times while she peppered his face with kisses. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too, Munchkin.” He set her down. “And now I’d like you to meet –

“Maddie.” Annie grinned. “I already know Maddie. We had lunch a couple of days ago.”

It took a moment for Maddie to wrap her brain around what had just happened. “You’re not the maintenance man? But I saw you up in the Drummond offices the other day after someone called for maintenance.”

“Sorry to disappoint you. I’m Brent Drummond. I do work here, though.” He jerked his thumb skyward. “At DE. I’m a geologist.”

“Lucky you.” Maddie smiled. “No suit.”

“Don’t I know it.” He picked up Annie’s backpack and gave an exaggerated groan. “What have you got in here? It weighs a ton.” He hefted it easily. “Maybe two tons.”

Annie looked at Maddie and rolled her eyes. It was obvious that she adored her Uncle Brent just as much as she adored Chase. “It’s my skates. The rink is open, and Uncle Chase said I could skate for a while.” She checked her watch. “I’d better hurry. Brittany’s mom says she can only stay until four thirty, then I have to come back here.”

“What if I came over around four thirty? I could stay with you until five.” Maddie had no idea where those words had come from, but she couldn’t take them back now. “That will give you a bit longer to skate.”

“That would be great.” She checked her watch again. “Uncle Brent, would you tell Uncle Chase that I checked in and I’ve gone to the rink? I forgot my cell phone this morning.”

“Sure.” Brent looked out toward the street. Daylight was fading, and the streetlights were coming on. “You be careful, okay? It’s getting dark.”

She nodded and ran off, then came back a few steps. “Your store looks very nice, Maddie. I like the lights.” Then she was off again and disappeared through the heavy revolving doors.

Maddie watched her go and then returned her gaze to Brent. “I can’t believe how polite that child is.”

Brent nodded. “Sometimes Chase and I worry that she’s too perfect. It’s almost as though she’s afraid if she does something wrong we won’t want her. She has her days, but by and large, she’s an

amazing kid.”

“Well I admire both of you. It can’t be easy raising a girl that age...” She let her words trail off, not wanting to delve into any uncomfortable subject matter.

He seemed to read her mind. “Yes, well, there’s Cynthia.” He frowned. “Although I’m not sure how well she and Annie are getting along.”

Maddie forced herself to stay silent. No way was she going to get involved in a discussion about Chase’s girlfriend.

There was an uncomfortable moment of silence. Maddie was taken back to the time many years ago when she’d had a crush on Jimmy Freeman. He would stand beside her in the schoolyard, tongue-tied, digging the toe of his running shoe into the dirt. Brent was acting like that now, and it was more than a little appealing.

“Well, I’d better get upstairs.” Brent’s words startled her out of her reverie. “I enjoyed helping you, Maddie LaRocque.” He picked up the ladder.

“Here, let me take that. I can manage.” She reached for the ladder, and their fingers brushed together, igniting a spark of awareness that crackled in the air between them.

He glanced quickly toward their hands, and his eyes darkened. “I’ve got it.”

“Okay, thanks.” She tried not to watch him as he walked away, but she wasn’t that disciplined. She judged him to be well over six feet, and every inch of him was appealingly masculine. His soft leather bomber jacket revealed a very nice butt.

Maddie LaRocque, you’re shameless, she told herself and scurried inside her shop so she wouldn’t be standing there staring when he came back. It was becoming easier to understand why Lily had been bowled over the first time she saw Chase. These Drummond men had something, and they had it in spades!

“Bye, Maddie.” He popped his head around the corner and gave her a jaunty wave. “Nice to meet you.”

“Me too.” She gave him what she hoped was a normal smile. “And thanks for the help.”

“Any time.” The elevator opened, and he jogged across the lobby to catch it. Was she going to be distracted every time the elevator opened?

Oh, yeah.

* * *

“Brent, you’re back.” Chase looked up as Brent came into the office. As usual, his brother looked as though he’d been out on the prairie, letting the wind blow through his hair. Sometimes Chase wished their positions were reversed, but he was the older brother and had been groomed to become the company head ever since he could remember.

“I saw Annie downstairs. She asked me to tell you she’s at the rink with some kids from school.” Brent paced around the office, looking at the items on display as though he’d never seen them before.

Chase glanced toward the windows. “Are they supervised?”

“Until four thirty.”

“One of us will have to go and get her, I suppose.” Chase looked at his brother hopefully.

“Could you do it? I’m right in the middle of something here.”

“Maddie volunteered to go over at four thirty.” Brent sat down abruptly. “Where did she come from?”

“Maddie volunteered? That was nice of her.”

“Annie seems to like her.” Brent watched his brother. “Where did she come from?”

Chase leaned back in his seat. “She was working for that accounting firm on the sixth floor and was laid off a few days ago. She’s leased the space downstairs for two months.”

“She’s attractive.” Brent picked up a glass paperweight from his brother’s desk and toyed with it. “Are you interested in her?”

“No, but...” his eyes narrowed. “Why do you ask?” Chase threw back his head and laughed.

“This is rich! What about—“

Brent held up a hand. “I know, I know. But there’s something about her.” He frowned and looked into the distance. “She seems real. I liked her.”

Chase leaned forward. “You’re right about that. You know David downstairs in the lobby?”

Brent nodded.

“He told me that Maddie introduced herself and asked him his name within two days of coming

to work in this building. She says hello to him every day. How many people do you think do that?"

"Probably none." Brent and Chase were both fond of the old pensioner.

"Well, enough chit-chat." Brent rose, and there was a gleam in his eyes. "I'll be in my office for the next hour then I think I might mosey on over to the rink."

Chase shook his head. "You be careful. "

"Always."

Chase watched his brother leave the office. He hadn't seen him so enthusiastic in ages.

Chapter Eight

Fine snow started to drift down as Maddie made her way to the rink. She could hear childrens' voices well before she saw them, and smiled. She chose a spot on the top row of the tiered cement steps that overlooked the ice and waved to Annie as she skated by.

There was something comforting about watching children at play. In that moment, she was reminded of Connor's exuberant antics, although the truth was she seldom thought about him anymore. As for Allan, she thought about him even less.

A flash on the far side of the rink caught her eye. Annie's group was taking pictures of each other, amid much giggling. How did children do that anyway, worm their way into your heart when you weren't looking? She sighed and tucked her hands into her pockets.

"That was a big sigh."

Brent stood above her, his hair dusted with snow. He motioned her to get up, and she complied wordlessly. She hoped she wasn't imagining his presence.

He carefully folded an old blanket and placed it on the step. "Sit on this," he said. "That cold cement isn't good for you."

It felt much better, especially when he sat down beside her.

"Hello again," he said, bending his legs and draping his arms over his knees. He scanned the ice. "Where is our girl?"

"Last I saw her she was over there, taking pictures." Maddie pointed to the far side of the rink. "There she is; they're still at it."

"Good." He watched for a moment, then turned back to her. "Thank you for doing this. I know you must be busy, setting up your business and all."

"I'd done about all I could for today." She lifted her face to the falling snow. "Besides, I've been inside far too much recently."

The way he was looking at her made her heart go all skittery in her chest. "I guess that's not a problem for you. Don't geologists spend a lot of time outdoors?"

"Yes, but not as much as you might think. Even so, I wouldn't trade it."

They sat silently for a while, watching the skaters. Annie spotted them and waved, but kept on going.

“A penny for your thoughts.” He’d leaned closer, and she could see individual snowflakes on his eyelashes.

She looked into his eyes. They appeared darker than before, but that was a trick of the light. Dark or light, they were compelling.

“Shall I make up something outrageous, or do you want the truth?”

“The truth,” he said simply. “Always the truth.”

She nodded as if this was an ongoing conversation. “Okay then. I was hoping that my business is successful. I know it’s only for a couple of months, but I’ve never done anything completely on my own before.” She tilted her head and smiled to herself. “It’s a matter of pride, I suppose.”

He leaned into her for a moment. “You’ll do fine.”

She pulled back, giving him a little attitude. “And you know this because...”

He wasn’t deterred. “Because you’re good people, Maddie LaRocque.” He turned back to the ice, and the moment he spotted Annie, his eyes softened. “How about I give you your first piece of business? I’d like you to get something for Annie for Christmas.”

She followed his line of sight. The girls were catching snowflakes on their tongues. “I told Chase what she wants, but I got the impression that there’d been some negative feedback from someone within the household.”

“Cynthia!” He almost spit the word out. “She’s not part of the household.” He seemed to be struggling to maintain his composure.

Maddie wasn’t sure how to respond, but he was easy to talk to, and she wanted to stand up for Annie. “She really does want a sewing machine, you know. My friend Lily knows about these things, and she says that Annie could easily master using one. She says that girls even younger than Annie have no problems if they’re shown the basics.” She was starting to babble, and forced herself to slow down a bit. “Annie’s going to visit Lily’s studio one of these days. She’s fascinated by anything to do with fashion.”

He scrubbed a hand over his face. "Sewing machines, fashion, people named Lily. See what happens? I go away, and it's as if I've lost my place."

"It's not as if you were off shooting craps in Las Vegas." She feigned horror. "Were you?"

He laughed, and his shoulders relaxed. "No, you're right. Things are bound to happen when I'm not here."

It was her turn to bump shoulders with him. "Annie's lucky that you care so much."

He nodded absently. "So who's Lily?"

"My roommate. Lily Hsu. She has a silkscreening studio out by the airport." She lifted her shoulders. "I don't know how it happened, but Lily and I sort of adopted Annie."

"Does Chase know about this?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, yeah. He's met Lily and everything." She smiled to herself, recalling the sparks between the two A-type personalities.

Brent looked at her oddly. "Why did you say it like that? About Chase meeting your roommate?"

"No reason." Maddie shrugged again. "You should ask him."

"Uncle Brent. Put your arm around Maddie so I can take your picture." They'd been so engrossed in their conversation, they hadn't noticed Annie. She stood before them, her camera raised.

He put an arm around Maddie. "How's this?" he said, posing for his niece.

"Perfect," she said, flashing a surprisingly adult smile at Maddie. "Just perfect."

More parents had arrived, and most of the girls were taking off their skates. "Five more minutes, okay, Munchkin?" Brent called to her retreating back.

She waved and skated off.

"And then there's the puppy." Brent shot her a cautious look out of the corner of his eye.

"What puppy?" Maddie frowned.

"For Annie. For Christmas." Why was he looking guilty?

"Has she asked for a dog? And how long has she been asking, or is this a spur-of-the-moment thing?"

"Well..." Brent looked uncomfortable. "She didn't exactly ask for one. But she's plenty old,

don't you think?"

Maddie gave him a punch on the arm. "It's for you, you phony! You're the one who wants a dog."

He grabbed his arm. "Ow! That hurt."

"Did not, you big baby."

"Okay, I confess. I'd like to have a dog in the house, but I really do think Annie would benefit from having a dog of her own."

"Are you asking me to get one? I'll need to know what kind."

His gaze rested on Annie. "A family dog. One that's gentle."

"I'll do it, but only if I can get a dog from a shelter."

"That's a great idea. And the company can make a generous donation, as well."

"How much?" She looked at him with a challenge in her eyes.

"Five hundred dollars?"

"I thought you said generous."

"Okay then, a thousand." They laughed together, and when they stopped, their heads were close.

This time she didn't imagine the desire in his eyes. For a moment she thought he was going to kiss her, and then he shook himself, dislodging the snow that had gathered on his jacket.

"Brent?" she said softly, raising a hand to his cheek. His beard wasn't at all prickly, it was soft and inviting. "Is there something wrong?"

"Yes." The desire in his eyes had turned to something close to desperation. "I have to go away again." His gaze darted around the rink, as though he was looking for a way out. "My timing sucks."

He stayed silent for a few moments.

"I want to see you again when I get back." He looked into her eyes. "Would that be okay with you?"

Her smile was her answer, but to be sure, she nodded. "I'd like that," she said. "I'd like that a lot."

He leaned forward, his intention clear. Heart pounding, she lifted her lips to meet him. He cupped her head with one large hand, his fingers splayed in her braid. Then his lips covered hers, and she met him eagerly, reveling in the touch and taste of him. Large flakes began to fall, but lost in the sweetness of their first kiss, they barely noticed.

He pulled back with a shy smile. "Sorry," he said. "That was a bit awkward."

"Was it?" She smiled up at him. "I didn't notice."

He ran his thumb over her bottom lip, and every nerve ending in her body caught fire. "To be continued," he said softly, just as Annie skated up.

* * *

"That was fun." Annie climbed into the front seat of Brent's SUV and reached for her seatbelt. "Was Maddie surprised to see you?"

Brent made sure she was settled, then pulled out of the garage. "I'm not sure," he said, his thoughts returning to Maddie, recalling how the snowflakes had dusted her hair, and the taste of her lips. What he *was* sure of was that nothing could have kept him away from the rink this afternoon. From the moment Maddie LaRocque had fallen into his arms, he'd been a goner. Nothing in his scientific training had prepared him for the surge of emotion he'd felt the first time he looked into her eyes. There had been something...an instant connection...that had him wondering just what he'd been doing with his life up until that moment.

He looked across to see Annie fiddling with her camera. "Did you get some good pictures?"

"Uh-huh. I'll show you when we get home." She scrolled through the shots and paused when she came to the one of Brent and Maddie. "The one of you and Maddie is good. I think I'll print it out and put it in a frame in my bedroom." She was silent for a moment.

"What is it, Munchkin? You look sad." He reached across and squeezed her hand.

She continued to stare at the photograph. "Do you think it will be wrong for me to have some happy pictures in my bedroom? You know, besides my pictures of Mom and Dad?"

A lump rose in Brent's throat, but he managed to get past it. "Not at all." He paused. "Are you saying that the pictures of your mom and dad make you sad?"

"Yeah." She rubbed a finger across the display screen. "Maddie said it's okay to be sad. She

told me I'll never forget them, but after a while it will stop hurting." She gave him a sideways look. "Do you think that's true?"

"Yes, I do." A stab of jealousy caught him by surprise. He wanted Annie to confide in him, and in Chase, and yet she'd been discussing her innermost secrets with a woman she'd only known for a short while. And yet somehow he wasn't surprised. If Annie was going to talk to anyone, he'd prefer it to be Maddie.

"Maddie says that happy memories will start to crowd out the sad ones." She clutched the camera as if it were a lifeline. "So I've decided. I'm definitely going to put your picture up in my bedroom. The one of you and Maddie together. You both look so happy."

Brent relaxed his grip on the steering wheel. The child was right. All it had taken was sitting beside Maddie and happiness had washed over him. How had he gotten his personal life into such a mess?

* * *

Brent turned off the highway and rolled down his window as he drove along the road leading to the sprawling family home. He did this every time he came home; there was something about the air out here on the edge of the prairie that had a calming effect on him. His grandfather had built the home on a section of rough land that wasn't suited for farming, but had been an amazing place to grow up. ATVs in the summer, Ski-Doos in the winter, fishing in the trout stream that meandered through their property...the memories crowded happily together.

A small sports car sat off to the side of the six-car garage. "Cynthia is here," said Annie, her tone flat.

Brent raised his eyebrows and pressed the garage door opener.

Chase's vehicle was parked in its usual spot. "Oh, look. Uncle Chase is home already." Annie jumped out as soon as Brent parked and grabbed her backpack from the rear seat.

They entered the mudroom and were met with the enticing aroma of chicken. Annie wiggled her nose. "Smells like Hannah made chicken again." She dropped her backpack and ran into the kitchen to greet the housekeeper. Hannah and Declan O'Farrell had worked on the estate as long as

Brent could remember. They lived comfortably in a suite over the garage, content to take care of ‘the boys.’

Brent hung up his jacket, followed Annie into the kitchen and sniffed appreciatively. “Hannah my love, are you sure you won’t marry me?” He gave her an affectionate kiss on the cheek.

“You’re too good for that scoundrel you’re married to.”

“One of these days I’m going to say yes, then where will you be?” The housekeeper’s eyes flashed in amusement.

Brent put a hand over his heart. “Then I’ll be in heaven.”

“Go on now.” She darted a look toward the sunken living room. “Miss Cynthia is here. She’s having a drink with your brother.”

Brent stifled a groan. “I’d forgotten until I saw her car. We’re supposed to meet some people later.” He snatched at a piece of chicken, and Hannah swatted at his hand. “I wonder if I can get out of it.”

He took a deep breath, pasted a smile on his face and sauntered into the living room. Cynthia was curled up in a chair by the fireplace, her straight blonde hair gleaming in the light of the fire.

“Hello, darling.” She glanced at her watch, and a slight frown furrowed her brow. “I hope you haven’t forgotten that we’re meeting the gang at the club tonight.”

“Actually, I had forgotten.”

Her pale green eyes darkened angrily.

“But I couldn’t have gone anyway. I have to head out first thing in the morning. Sorry.” He didn’t sound sorry, and he knew it, but he was tired of pretending. He had no idea why he’d ever allowed himself to become involved with Cynthia Fairbairn. He raked his fingers through his hair and sat down as far away from her as he could. Standing beside Chase’s chair, Annie watched the exchange with interest, and he gave her a broad wink.

Actually, he did know why he’d become involved with Cynthia. It had made sense at the time, but looking back now, his reasoning had been completely irrational. At the rate Chase was going, he was never going to get married, and it had seemed to Brent that someone needed to give Annie a stable home life. Why he had thought Cynthia would be the one to do that, he didn’t know. He

couldn't have made a worse choice if he'd tried. Thank goodness they hadn't actually announced an engagement. Cynthia had been pressing for some time for a ring, but he supposed that deep down he'd known it was a mistake. A mistake that he needed to rectify, and soon. He was leaving tomorrow, but he'd sort things out with her as soon as he got back.

"...and this is one of Uncle Brent and Maddie." Annie had dragged her backpack into the room and was showing Chase the pictures. "Don't they look happy?"

Cynthia unfolded her long, elegant legs and walked over to stand behind Chase's chair. "And who is Maddie?" she asked, casting a quick glance at the display on the back of the camera. Her words were like ice crystals. "You look very chummy."

Chase glanced up quickly, then returned his attention to the picture. "She's rented the shop in the lobby of the building." He gave Annie a quick hug. "She and Annie have become good friends."

Annie nodded and ran over to Brent. "Have a look. You didn't get to see it properly on the way home."

Brent examined the picture. It had felt so right sitting there beside Maddie, watching the children. He'd never felt a hint of the same contentment with Cynthia...not that she would ever bundle up and sit outside on a cold step. He looked up as she moved to return to her chair and caught her foot in the strap of Annie's backpack.

"For heaven's sake, child. Put your things away!"

Annie pulled back, and Brent surged out of his chair, hands clenched at his sides. Harsh words were on the tip of his tongue; words he'd wanted to say for some time. Fortunately, Hannah chose that moment to announce that dinner was on the table, and he reined himself in.

"You can put your things away after dinner," he said to Annie, a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Come on, let's get some of that chicken."

Chapter Nine

Brent pushed back from the table and patted his stomach. “That was good.” He looked over at his brother. “Sorry Cynthia made such a fuss when she left.”

Chase shrugged. “Just as well. She can put a damper on things when she gets like that.” He looked toward the stairs where his niece had disappeared a few moments ago. “I didn’t want to say anything in front of Annie, but what’s going on with you two?”

Brent toyed with his water glass. “I never should have become involved with her. I plan to end it next week when I get back.”

“Good luck with that.” Chase’s tone made it clear what he thought. “She thinks she’s engaged to you, you know.” He held up a hand. “I know, I know. You’ve never given her a ring, and I assume you’ve never officially asked her, but nevertheless it’s what she thinks.” He paused. “Why did you get involved with her anyway? It’s not as if you need to get married.”

Brent groaned. He’d created this mess and owed his brother an explanation.

“I did it for all the wrong reasons; I can see that now.” He took a deep breath. “You see, I figured you were never going to get married, and I wanted to create a stable family life for Annie.”

Chase snorted. “Life with Cynthia would never be stable.”

“You’re right, of course, but do you have to rub it in?”

Chase chuckled. “Besides, who said I’d never get married?”

Brent looked at his brother as though he were a stranger. “I’ve never heard you say anything, or seen you seriously date anyone. Seems to me you’ve always been too wrapped up in the company to have much of a personal life.” His eyes narrowed. “You’ve met someone, haven’t you?”

The smile on Chase’s face was all the answer he needed. “You see, this is what I’m talking about. I go away for a few days, and everything changes. Out with it, man. Who is it?”

Chase stared at the tablecloth and shook his head back and forth. “I met her the other day when I was having lunch with Annie.”

Brent’s expression was thunderous. “Not Maddie!”

Chase looked up, confused. “No, not Maddie. Her roommate, Lily.” His features softened. “I

can't get her out of my mind. She's fiery, she's independent, and as if that wasn't enough, she's the most beautiful creature I've ever seen."

"So when are you going out with her? Or have you already?"

Chase stared into the distance. "That's the thing. She doesn't seem to want to have anything to do with me."

Brent was silent for a moment and then laughed. "Come on, Chase. Stop kidding around. There isn't a single woman in Calgary who isn't interested in Chase Drummond." He smiled a wicked smile. "And many of the married ones, I imagine."

Chase acknowledged his brother's kidding with a wry smile. "I've found the one I'm interested in."

Brent sobered. "You're serious, aren't you?"

Chase nodded. "I walked into that coffee shop and saw her, and the ground gave way beneath my feet." He gave a self-deprecating laugh. "Sounds like something out of a soap opera, I suppose, but bingo!" He snapped his fingers. "It happened just like that."

Brent tried to hide a smile. "Me, too."

Chase's head snapped up. "You've met her?"

"No, you jerk. I'm talking about Maddie. When she fell off that ladder and I caught her, it was the best moment of my life."

Chase drummed his fingers on the table. "Maddie, huh? Good for you. But you're saying you met her when she fell off a ladder? That really does sound like something out of a romance novel." He eyed his brother suspiciously. "So is that what's behind this sudden need to get rid of Cynthia?"

Brent shook his head. "Not really. That's been coming for a while. I don't like the way she treats Annie. By the way, we're getting Annie a sewing machine for Christmas."

Chase's eyes went to the stairs. "Speaking of which, we'd better get up there and tuck her in."

Brent rose from the table. "No game of checkers tonight?"

"No, the skating tired her out. We'll have two games tomorrow night." He clapped his brother on the shoulder. "So...it looks like the Drummond brothers are off the market."

Brent gave him a skeptical look. "I am, definitely. It's you I'm not sure about."

* * *

Lily was pouring a glass of wine when Maddie got home. She held up the bottle, wiggled it in invitation, and Maddie nodded. Lily poured a second glass and shoved it across the counter.

"I see you got your lights up."

Maddie turned from hanging up her coat. "You went by the building?"

Lily flushed. "Yeah. I had to drop some product off at Draper's."

Maddie worked hard not to smile. "Going into the Drummond Building could be dangerous."

"Dangerous?" Lily paused, wine glass half way to her lips.

"Definitely. You might have run into Chase."

Lily's cheeks flushed even brighter. "Oh, him. I didn't even think about that."

"Lily Hsu. You're such a phony." Maddie stared her down. "You're blushing."

Her roommate tried to look fierce, but a spark of amusement gave her away. "Nonsense. It's the wine." She tossed back her hair. "You know how we Asians are."

That excuse was getting a bit old, but Maddie decided not to challenge it. "So did you see him by any chance?"

Lily sighed. "No." She ran a finger around the rim of her wine glass. "The lights look nice, though, and I saw a couple of people taking the flyers you left out. I have a feeling you're going to be busy."

"I hope so, but I've been thinking, and you were right when you said I'd probably need some help. I can't be in two places at once, and I hate the idea of losing any business."

Lily wrapped a strand of hair around her finger. It was something she did when thinking, and Maddie remained silent.

"I know someone you might hire. She's working for me now, and she's just not suited to production. She needs to be out dealing with the public." She tossed back the strand of hair. "It's a toss-up which comes first. Either she'll quit, or I'll let her go, but I'd rather not have to do that. Not everyone takes getting laid off as positively as you did. I don't want to make her lose confidence, because I'm quite sure there's a future for her in sales of some kind."

Maddie was one of the few people who ever saw the softer side of her roommate. Lily was fiercely competitive and could be aggressive when it came to promoting her business, but she treated her people with consideration, one of the things Maddie loved about her.

“She sounds a bit...exuberant.” Maddie frowned. “Do you really think she’d be suitable?”

“Without a doubt.” Lily gave her head a brisk, no-nonsense shake. “And she’s quite artistic as well. That’s partly why she’s unhappy. She needs an outlet for her creativity.”

Maddie trusted Lily’s judgment. “All right, then. How should we go about this?”

Lily toyed with her hair again. “I’ll mention tomorrow that you’re looking for someone. She’ll be there the same day, I can almost guarantee it. Her name is Zelda, by the way.”

Maddie groaned. “And I suppose her boyfriend’s name is Scott.”

Lily chuckled. “Wouldn’t that be something? No, I think his name is Brendan. And listen, if you need her soon, she can leave almost any time. Most of our Christmas orders went out back in early fall, so we’re working on next year. This would be a good time for me to train someone new.” She glanced at her watch. “By the way, where were you when I stopped by? That was more than half an hour ago.”

It was Maddie’s turn to blush. “I was over at the skating rink, watching Annie.”

“Watching Annie, huh?” Lily lifted her glass and stared over the rim. “Why am I thinking there’s something you’re not telling me?”

“How do you do it, Lily? How do you always know?”

Her friend gave an elegant shrug of her shoulders. “I’ve known you too long, kiddo. We practically grew up together, remember?”

“Yeah.” Maddie stared into her wine. “You’re not going to believe this, but I’ve met someone, too.”

Lily scooted forward on her stool. “That’s terrific.” She pulled back a bit. “Isn’t it?”

Maddie raised her eyes. “His name is Brent, and he’s Chase Drummond’s brother.”

Lily was silent for a moment, absorbing this information. “Tell me.”

“Well, the first time I saw him, I thought he was the maintenance guy in the building.” She smiled

at the memory. “And then today he came by the shop when I was setting up, and I asked him to help me. He played along, and it wasn’t until Annie came running in that I knew who he was.”

Lily shook her head. “How could you possibly think...?”

“He’s a geologist. He wears tight jeans and a soft leather bomber jacket, and his hair isn’t all slicked down. He’s definitely not a suit.”

“I thought there was something different about you. You have stars in your eyes.” Lily tilted her head to one side. “Did he mention Chase?”

There was something in her voice, something wistful. “Nothing specific. Any time he mentioned Chase, it was to do with Annie. You know, what a good kid she is...stuff like that. He says I’m to go ahead and get a sewing machine for her. He also mentioned a puppy, but somehow I think that’s more for himself than it is for Annie.”

“We really should get her out to the studio. After all, we promised.”

“I think I heard some of the mothers talking about the teachers taking the afternoon off tomorrow and the next day.” Maddie watched her friend as she spoke.

Lily brightened. “Sounds good. How does that fit in with your schedule?”

“Well...” Maddie took the plunge. “I might be busy. Would it be okay if Chase brought her?” She sensed rather than saw the excitement in her friend.

“Okay.” Lily looked Maddie in the eye. “I’ve been doing some thinking, and I might have misjudged him.” She picked up the wine bottle and deposited it in the recycle bin, suddenly businesslike. “I think I’ll go wash my hair and turn in early.” A hopeful smile touched her lips. “As the saying goes, tomorrow is another day.”

* * *

Maddie was jotting down the details of her third order of the morning when she looked up to see a young woman standing nervously in front of her shop. Tall and slender, her blonde hair was saved from perfection by a broad swath of dark red.

This must be Zelda, she thought, studying the young woman. She’d made an attempt to tone down her hair with a wide gold barrette, and the effect was striking.

“Thank you for the order,” she said into the phone and checked the details. “This shouldn’t be

any problem.” She disconnected and raised her head. “Hello, are you Zelda?”

The young woman’s smile lit up the lobby. “Yes.” She held out her hand. “You must be Maddie.”

They discussed the job and agreed that Zelda would start on the following Monday. Her new helper asked if she could check the gift wrapping supplies and made a few suggestions.

“I know where we could pick up some inexpensive baskets.” She pointed to the shelves in the back of the shop. “We could put together some ready-made gift baskets and give them attractive names.” She strode back and forth as she spoke. “Like ‘wine lovers’ or ‘gourmet’ or ‘scrapbookers’ or ‘golfers’. We could make up a few samples and put them there. Do you mind if I put some ideas together as to content and prices?” She nodded to herself, and Maddie could tell she was assembling items in her mind. “Also, do you know that big craft store out by the airport?”

Maddie shook her head. “I haven’t lived here very long.”

“They’re having a closing out sale. I could pick up some raffia and check out their ribbons and stuff like that. This is going to be so cool!”

Maddie was swept up by the girl’s enthusiasm and didn’t notice Chase, who stood watching them with a smile on his face. She waved him over.

“I put some of your flyers up in the club,” he said before she could speak.

“Thank you. I’ve already had three orders this morning.” She motioned to Zelda. “This is Zelda, and she’s going to give me a hand starting next week. She has some great ideas already. Zelda, I’d like you to meet Chase Drummond.”

He nodded. “Nice to meet you, Zelda. Well, I should get going.”

Maddie ducked out the side door of her shop and ran across the lobby to catch up to him. “Brent asked me to get a sewing machine for Annie, but since I started the conversation with you, I thought I’d double check. Is that okay?”

“Sure.” He seemed awfully casual about it when his girlfriend had been so opposed, but who was she to question? “Oh, by the way, I understand that Annie has the next two afternoons off. I checked with Lily, and she says Annie is welcome to go to the studio either this afternoon or tomorrow, if that’s convenient.” She pretended not to see the flare of interest in his eyes, and

looked back toward her shop. “I really don’t have time to take her out there myself. Is there anyone else who could take her?”

He answered almost before she’d finished talking. “I can take her.”

“Okay, I’ll jot down her address and phone number for you.” She turned aside so he wouldn’t see her look of triumph. She handed him the card. “Have fun.”

Chase took the card, tucked it into his inside jacket pocket and patted it. “I will.”

* * *

“Lily, there’s a man on line one for you.”

Lily looked up from the cutting table. She still did almost all of the cutting by herself, especially when costly fabrics were involved. She had created a stunning peony devore design on rich burgundy velvet, and didn’t trust the cutting to anyone else.

“Take a message, Helka. I’ll call him back as soon as I can.”

Her assistant placed her hand over the receiver. “He says his name is Chase Drummond.”

Lily’s heartbeat accelerated but she forced herself to remain calm. “I’ll be right there.”

She put down the scissors, composed herself and walked to her office. “Lily Hsu,” she said, wondering if she sounded as nervous as she felt.

“Hello, Lily. I don’t know if you remember me, it’s Chase Drummond.” His voice lit a fire in the pit of her stomach. “I saw Maddie this morning and she mentioned that it would be all right if I brought Annie around for a visit.” He sounded almost breathless. “Would this afternoon be too soon?”

Lily couldn’t bring herself to play games. “Yes, that would be fine.” She glanced at the wall clock. “What time will you be here?”

“About two, if that’s all right.”

“I’ll look forward to it.” Flustered, Lily wondered how that sounded. “I’ll look forward to seeing Annie.” She hung up and looked at her shaking hand. If she was going to finish cutting that fabric, she’d better get herself under control.

* * *

Maddie took four more orders in the space of an hour; it was a good thing Zelda would be starting soon. The young woman's enthusiasm and ideas had given her a much-needed lift; she was surprised at how much she was missing Brent. She'd known him for such a short time, and yet every time she thought about him, she smiled. And he'd said he'd like to see her when he got back...

Her phone rang again. She'd downloaded *Dashing Through The Snow* as her ringtone and it was getting old already. She put a smile in her voice. "Hello. Gift Wrapped for Christmas."

"Maddie?" The husky voice made her heart beat a little faster. "How are you?"

She glanced around the lobby and lowered her voice. "I'm fine, how are you? I didn't expect to hear from you this soon." She gave a low, intimate laugh, not caring if he could tell how happy she was to hear from him. "But I'm glad you called."

"Maddie?" the voice changed, and her heart sank when she realized that it wasn't Brent.

"Allan?" Stunned to hear from the man who'd so brusquely dumped her six months prior, she couldn't think of anything to say.

He gave a nervous laugh. "I wasn't sure you'd remember me."

What a stupid thing to say. What kind of games was he playing? She allowed some anger to creep into her voice. "What do you want, Allan?"

He cleared his throat. "I've been thinking about you a lot recently, and I just wanted to see how you're doing."

Was he kidding? Jumbled thoughts chased each other through her mind. She was angry at him for not being Brent, but she was also angry at herself for having given him her phone number. He'd asked for it when she first moved, while she'd still felt a connection to Connor, and she'd given in.

"Excuse me, Allan, but I'd like to take this opportunity to remind you that you have a fiancée. It's bad form to be thinking of someone else."

"Actually, that's what I wanted to talk to you about. Marie is a lovely girl, but that was a mistake." He paused and took a deep breath. "I'd like to come and see you."

"No!" She didn't have to think twice. "Definitely not." She noticed a couple of people in the lobby staring at her; she must have raised her voice. She reeled in her temper and forced herself to

speaking calmly. “Don’t do that, Allan. Don’t come here. There’s nothing between us.”

“Can’t we at least be friends?”

Maddie pressed the fingers of her free hand to the center of her forehead. She was starting to get a headache.

“We are *not* friends, Allan. Friends don’t date you for over three years, act as if you have a future together and then turn around and announce that they’re going to marry someone else. That’s not what friends do.” A customer walked up to her shop and picked up the brochure outlining her services. “Listen, I have to go. I’m sorry things didn’t work out for you, but as far as you and I, that was over the moment you dumped me.” She didn’t wait for him to respond. “Goodbye, Allan.”

She disconnected, gripped the counter to steady herself and smiled at the customer.

“Hi, I’m Maddie. Let me know if I can answer any questions.”

Chapter Ten

“Uncle Chase, this is so exciting.” Annie had been vibrating with enthusiasm ever since Chase told her they were going to visit Lily’s studio. “Do you know how to find it?”

He pointed to a folded piece of paper in the console between the seats. “I printed out a Google map. You could help me navigate if you like.”

Lily’s business was located in the industrial section, in a plain white building. The business name appeared on a discreet sign beside the entrance door and a small loading bay sat off to the far side of the front of the building.

Chase parked in a stall marked “Visitor” and grinned at Annie. “Ready?” he asked, acknowledging to himself that his question was as much about him as it was about his niece.

They stepped into a small but tastefully furnished reception area. A receptionist looked up and welcomed them warmly. “You must be Annie and Mr. Drummond.”

Chase extended his hand. “We’re a few minutes early, I hope that’s all right.” The wall behind the receptionist was mostly plate glass and overlooked the production floor. He scanned the space, looking for Lily. Annie squirmed at his side and was about to say something when the door opened, and Lily came out. She glanced at Chase and then smiled at Annie. “I’m so glad you could come. Welcome to my shop.”

Chase couldn’t stop smiling as Lily greeted Annie. They were soon chattering together like best friends. He didn’t know which one made him prouder...the woman he’d fallen for or his niece.

Lily raised her head, and he was treated to the full effect of her amazing eyes. There was something different about them today. There was no mistaking the wariness there, but the gaze she gave him was softer, more receptive. A glimmer of hope took up residence inside his chest.

“You can wait out here if you like, or you can come with us.” She smiled at him. “I’m not sure if you’ll find it very interesting.”

He managed to find his voice. “I’d like to tag along, if you don’t mind. I already have a question.” He held open the door to the work floor, and she stepped under his raised arm.

“What is that?” she asked, touching Annie on the shoulder, keeping her part of the conversation.

“That odd-looking rectangular contraption over there.” Chase pointed to a metal rack that held fabric suspended from fine hooks. “What’s going on with that?”

Lily nodded. “It looks like some sort of a torture device, doesn’t it?” She was relaxed and in her element. “We use it for the velvets, mostly. Keeps the fabric from getting crushed.”

It was Chase’s turn to nod. “Makes sense.” He stepped back. “You and Annie go ahead. I’ll just tag along.”

He followed while Lily took Annie through the various processes. The child was particularly fascinated by the way the screens for multi-colour projects fit together. Lily had set up a screen with a design from the Calgary Stampede and showed Annie how to produce a t-shirt. The child watched carefully and then asked if she could try to apply the last colour. Chase stood back and watched as the two heads came together, Lily’s hair shimmering black and heavy, and Annie’s fine and red. Lily spoke to Annie as an adult, and he could see the child’s confidence growing as Lily carefully explained the different processes.

“And over here is our fashion department.” Lily led them through a door into a long, narrow room. Sketches and fabric samples adorned one wall and stacks of fabric, all carefully marked, filled a massive set of shelves. Chase counted six industrial sewing machines, but only three were in use.

Lily noted the direction of his gaze. “We haven’t started our spring production yet.” She waved a hand. “Actually, a large percentage of our garments are produced by piece work.”

Chase’s business instincts came to the fore. “Do the workers ever let you down?”

Lily smiled sweetly. “Not twice.”

He grinned down at her. “Remind me not to get on your bad side.”

Her lips twitched, and she tilted her head, acknowledging his remark. Then she turned to Annie. “There’s not much else to see, but do you have any questions?”

The child looked around, wide-eyed. “Only about a million,” she said, looking from Lily to her uncle and then back to Lily. “There’s so much to see.” She touched one of the sewing machines reverently. “I’m going to start saving my allowance so I can get a sewing machine.”

“Good for you. Let me know when you get it, and I’ll show you some of the basics.”

“Would you?” Annie wrapped her arms around Lily’s waist then stepped back, embarrassed.

“That would be so cool.”

“Of course I will.” She pulled Annie to her side and shot a look of defiance at Chase. “I’ll have you sewing in no time.”

Chase felt as though he’d missed part of the conversation, but let it slide. “Well ladies, if the tour is over, can I take you out for tea? I understand there’s a little place a few blocks away. It’s not fancy, but they make their own cakes and pies.”

Annie tugged at Lily’s hand. “Please come,” she said. “It’ll be fun.”

Chase held his breath waiting for her response. Something flared in her eyes as she looked up at him. “Okay,” she said, returning her attention to Annie. “That sounds like fun.”

Annie crawled into the back seat. Chase held the door for Lily, and her scent invaded his nostrils. “Thank you,” she murmured. Once she was settled he handed her the seatbelt and their fingers brushed together. A spark of static electricity startled them both; she looked up at him under dark lashes, and his heart lurched inside his chest.

Annie peppered Lily with questions during the short drive to the small coffee shop. Lily turned sideways in her seat to answer, and they talked as though they’d known each other all their lives. A warm sensation washed over him. Perhaps he was being foolish, but he didn’t think he’d ever been this contented.

They sat in a corner booth, an old-fashioned semi-circle. Placed between the two adults, Annie beamed with pleasure as she ordered banana cream pie.

“And for you?” Chase tried not to stare at her. She’d removed her work smock before they left the studio, revealing a blousy white silk shirt which she’d cinched at the waist with a thin black leather belt. Her luxurious hair was down and she shoved it back, revealing simple gold hoops. He’d better stop staring before she pulled away from him again.

“I think that double chocolate cake sounds good.” She gave the waitress a dazzling smile. “And some Earl Grey tea, please.” She leaned into Annie. “What about you? Shall we share a pot of tea?”

“Yes, please.”

Chase ordered coffee and apple pie with a slice of cheddar, then turned his attention to Annie.

“So what did you think of Lily’s studio?”

Annie rolled her eyes, back to being a typical ten year old. “It was amazing. I can’t wait to tell my friends.”

“Remind me to run in and get that t-shirt for you when your uncle drops me off. I made it for you.”

Annie beamed her pleasure. “Thank you.”

The food arrived, and Lily dug into her chocolate cake. “Good,” she murmured, patting the edge of her mouth with a napkin and going in for another forkful. Her movements were decidedly delicate and feminine, and yet he sensed she could challenge a trucker to an eating contest.

He recalled the last time he’d dated Laurel Carmichael. She’d pushed her food around her plate, trying to make it appear as though she was eating. When he’d inquired if she would like some dessert, she’d looked at him as though he’d lost his mind. A few weeks ago he’d agreed to accompany her to an upcoming wedding of mutual friends. He regretted that decision now, but he didn’t see how he could cancel. It would be agony to be with Laurel when the only woman he wanted was sitting across from him.

Chase waited until Lily had finished her cake, then leaned forward. “If you don’t mind me asking, do you provide all the t-shirts for the Calgary Stampede?”

“No.” She shook her head. “Just some specialty items.” She scooted forward on the bench seat, completely changed as she talked business. “I looked into it a few years ago, but the numbers are staggering. Not only from the production standpoint, but price point. They can buy so much cheaper elsewhere.” She lifted her shoulders. “I can’t blame them for that. I’d do the same.” She tapped the side of her cup with her fingernails. “There are probably t-shirts being produced right now for next year...somewhere.”

He watched her reaction. “You don’t resent that?”

“Not really. I can only be competitive on orders up to around five thousand, and even that’s

pushing it.” She smiled at Annie to include her in the conversation. “Just think. If I committed myself to massive numbers like that, I’d never have branched out and designed my resort wear line.” She nodded to herself. “And my staff would be bored in no time. I’ve never wanted to work in an environment where I had to do the same thing every day.”

“Wait a sec. Did you say you designed the resort wear?” Chase’s respect for her was growing.

“I probably shouldn’t admit this, but it wasn’t that difficult. It’s not haute couture, and I’ve been on the fringes of design for most of my life.” She held up a finger. “I did hire a pattern maker, though. That’s a special skill.”

“I wonder,” he murmured, mulling over an idea in his head.

“You wonder what?” She was looking at him with a challenge in her eyes.

“Sorry. I was wondering about a charity event I’m involved in.” He was having a hard time concentrating, but this opportunity was perfect.

She remained silent, waiting for him to speak.

“I’m on the board of a low-key charity that supplies sporting equipment to children who can’t afford it.”

Lily’s eyes lit up, and he continued.

“We don’t get a lot of press. We don’t want any, to tell you the truth.” He gave her a quick smile. “There were just a few of us involved when we first started, but now there are...oh...two dozen active members. It’s only in Alberta, and our sole purpose is to help out kids in need.” He gazed into the distance for a moment. “You’d be surprised how much money it takes to outfit a kid for hockey, not to mention the costs to be involved in a league. Two years ago we added the same service for girls as well. There’s been a surge of interest in hockey by young girls since our Olympic success.”

“And by doing this, you’re encouraging them to be physically active.”

Chase grinned. “Exactly.”

Was that respect in her eyes? He didn’t know, but there was definitely a change. “So what were you wondering about?” she asked.

“We’re having one of our big annual fundraisers in a couple of weeks. It’s a fashion show and

silent auction. It's short notice, but if I can arrange it, would you be interested in showing some of your resort wear?"

"Absolutely." He could see her mind working. "We could offer to custom make the pieces." She twirled a piece of hair around her finger. "I'll probably sew them myself, but we don't have to say that." She looked at Annie. "What do you think? Good idea?" She held up her hand, and Annie gave her a high five.

Chase tried unsuccessfully to hide a smile. "Okay. I'll check with Nate as soon as I get back to the office. His wife is co-ordinating the fashion show."

"Great." Lily turned to Annie again. "Which pieces do you think I should show? That was my entire line in the fashion show the other week."

The child didn't miss a beat. "All of them."

"Yeah. That's what I was thinking." She looked directly at Chase. "This is an opportunity for me, as well. The type of people who attend something like that will be great for word-of-mouth advertising."

"Then it's win-win." Chase's expression softened as he looked at her. "Will you come with me? As my date?"

She hesitated for a moment, then gave him a smile that almost stopped his heart. "Yes, I'd enjoy that."

Annie looked from one to the other, grinning widely. "Cool."

* * *

Lily was surprised to see Maddie curled up on the couch when she got home. Her roommate looked flushed and was wrapped up in one of the soft throws they kept in a basket in the corner.

"Are you all right?" She strode across the room and placed a hand on her friend's forehead. "You don't seem to have a fever."

Maddie shook her head. "No, I'm not sick." She threw off the blanket, stood up and paced back and forth in front of the full-length windows. "I'm just upset. Allan called me today."

"Allan! What did he want?" Lily had never made a secret of her dislike for Allan.

"Apparently he's not engaged anymore and he had the nerve to ask if he could come here." She

stopped and stared out the window without seeing the view. “He wants to be friends again.”

Lily made an un-ladylike sound. “I hope you told him what he could do with his friendship.”

Maddie gave a weak smile. “I think I made myself pretty clear.” She stopped and looked at her friend. “You look different...oh my gosh, Lily, I’m sorry. I was so wrapped up in myself that I forgot to ask you. Did Chase and Annie come out this afternoon?” She smiled as Lily nodded.

“You should have seen the look on his face when I told him about going out to your studio.” She pulled her friend over to the counter and sat down. “Tell me all about it.”

Lily shrugged. “It was okay. I showed Annie around and then the three of us went out for tea.”

“Oh no you don’t! I know you too well, Lily Hsu. Don’t play the inscrutable Asian with me.”

Maddie made a “gimme” motion with her fingers. “Come on, tell me everything.”

“...and so I’m going to go to the auction with him. As his date.” Lily lowered her head. “I hope I don’t regret this.”

Maddie sucked in a breath. “Sometimes I don’t understand you, you know that? Anyone can see that the man is seriously interested in you.” She leaned forward and spoke firmly but gently. “He’s not that creep who used you, Lily. I don’t pretend to know Chase, but give him a chance. Okay?”

Lily nodded.

Maddie continued. “What was it like between you? Did you feel that same connection?”

“Oh, yeah.” Lily’s eyes took on a faraway look. “There’s definitely something there.”

Maddie sighed. “Then let it happen, Lils. Just let it happen.”

Lily smiled. “You haven’t called me that in a long time.” She looked across the table at her friend. “You’re right, I know that. What’s frightening me is that maybe I like him too much.”

Maddie shook her head. “There’s no such thing as too much.” She thought of Brent. “Trust me.”

Chapter Eleven

“Lily.” The receptionist’s voice came through the speaker phone. “I have Nancy Somerville on the line for you.”

“Nancy Somerville?” Lily pushed back from the cutting table. The name wasn’t familiar.

“She says she’s calling about the charity auction.”

“Oh, okay.” She walked to the old-fashioned wall phone and lifted the receiver. “Hello, Nancy, this is Lily.”

“Lily.” The woman’s words were clipped. “It’s Nancy Somerville. I’m the co-ordinator for the fashion show portion of the upcoming fundraiser, and I understand we’re going to include some of your clothes. I need to know how many items, and what they are.”

Lily sensed the undercurrents beneath the other woman’s words. Nancy Somerville was in charge of the fashion show and did not like the last minute addition of some ‘new’ designer, even if it resulted in more money for the cause.

Lily took a calming breath. Getting into an argument with this woman would serve no purpose. She put a smile in her voice and answered, “It’s resort wear, Nancy.” She gave what she hoped was a small, friendly laugh. “And if it throws your show out of synch, you don’t need to include me. At this late date, I’d understand.”

Silence greeted her words. Evidently Nancy had expected a confrontation, but Lily wasn’t about to give her the pleasure.

“Oh, well...” Nancy stammered. “No, we couldn’t do that.” Lily could hear her rifling through some papers. “Chase said to include you, and this is his event, so I certainly wouldn’t want to go against his wishes.”

Lily glanced around the fashion department. She’d pulled out all the stops and was in the midst of producing each outfit in several sizes as there was little time available for fittings. After the fashion show, she planned to offer the extra outfits to Chase for additional fundraising.

“I have ten items,” she said. “And if you like, I’ll e-mail you a photograph of each one with details. Would that help?”

The other woman seemed to have run out of bluster. “That sounds good.”

Lily pressed on. “Just let me know when you want to do the fittings, and I’ll be there. We’re producing a variety of sizes for each item.”

“You make them here?”

“Yes. I don’t believe in shipping my work offshore.” She wasn’t about to tell Nancy that her production was too small and too immediate to be sent to offshore manufacturers.

“Oh. I just thought...” Nancy’s words trailed off, but Lily got the message loud and clear. She was tempted to say that she was as much of a Canadian as the other woman but managed to bite her tongue.

“All right then.” Lily could picture the co-ordinator consulting her schedule. “I’ll call you some time next week about the fittings. Is that okay?”

“Sounds good. Thanks for calling.” Lily quietly placed the handset in the receiver. It was clear that Nancy Somerville didn’t like Chase Drummond interfering in her fashion show. Lily thought briefly about discussing it with him, then brushed that notion aside. He had enough to do without getting in the middle of a catfight.

Lily had a sudden thought. Maybe it wasn’t the last minute addition of the resort wear that was ruffling feathers. Perhaps it was the fact that Chase Drummond had insisted that Lily’s items be included. Hmmm...

“No sense speculating about that now,” she said aloud, and returned her attention to the brightly coloured fabric.

* * *

“Huh.” Nancy Somerville put down her cell phone and stared at it for a moment. “That was interesting,” she said, meeting the eyes of the woman across from her.

“So what did you think?” Laurel Carmichael tried not to appear too anxious, but Nancy knew better. From the moment she’d heard about Chase’s involvement in the fashion show, her friend had been on full alert. She’d been pursuing him for a year and a half, and in that time, Chase had been remarkably skillful at eluding her.

Nancy felt sorry for her friend as a kaleidoscope of emotions flashed across the other woman's face. The trouble was, Laurel had been kidding herself for so long she'd started to believe her own fantasy.

"She offered to withdraw her clothes from the show."

Laurel dismissed the comment with a wave of her hand. "That was just a power play. She knew you couldn't do that."

Nancy acknowledged her friend's comment with a nod. "I suppose so." She thought back to the conversation. "She was nice, but I get the feeling she can be tough."

"It's that damned kimchee they eat. That would toughen up anybody."

Nancy shook her head. "That's Korean. This woman is Chinese or something like that. Audrey from Draper's worked with her a few weeks ago and she told me she's gorgeous."

Laurel pushed the papers aside. "Well, she hasn't got him yet." She pulled out a compact and checked her appearance in the mirror. "I've got a lot invested in this relationship, and I'm not going to give up without a fight."

* * *

A dozen times a day, Maddie was glad she'd hired Zelda. The young woman brimmed over with original ideas and was cheerfully professional when dealing with the customers. She seemed to know precisely which ones to handle herself, and which ones should be passed to Maddie.

She waved the spiral binder under Maddie's nose even before she could get out of her coat. "The orders are coming in fast and furious." She slipped Maddie's coat off her shoulders and hung it up, talking the entire time. "Did you know your business was going to be this successful?"

"I'd hoped it would work, but I didn't think it would take off like this." Maddie leafed through the notes. They jotted down every call that came in, and the habit had already proven useful several times. Those inquiries that resulted in orders were formally written up and filed. It was a simple system, and it worked.

"Wait a minute, what's this?" Maddie's heart lurched as she came to an entry. "It says 'Brent called.'" She looked at her assistant. "Is that all?"

Zelda grinned. "Well, he seemed disappointed that you weren't in, but that's all the message he

left.” She frowned. “He was someplace noisy; it sounded like there was a lot of equipment in the background. Maybe that’s why he didn’t leave a longer message.”

Maddie’s shoulders fell, but she soon recovered. “At least he called,” she said. “That’s something.”

“Is he special?” Zelda’s tone softened.

Maddie closed her eyes for a moment. “Very special.” She gave herself a little shake. “Now let’s go over these orders.”

It was late in the day, and Zelda had gone home when Maddie’s phone rang. She was tempted to let it go, but it could be a new order. “Good afternoon, Maddie LaRocque speaking.”

“Maddie, I caught you.”

“Brent!” This time there was no question. She closed her eyes and pictured his face. “I’ve missed you.”

He chuckled. The low, sexy sound made her pulse speed up. “I’m glad to hear it. I’ve missed you, too.”

“It’s not the same over at the skating rink without you.” It was a silly thing to say, but she’d spent so little time with him...

“You’ve been watching over our girl.”

She smiled at his words. “Yeah, a couple of times. She loves it there.”

“I know.” He paused. “I wish I could tell you when I’ll be back, but things are happening fast here, and I need to stick around.”

“Have you made a new discovery or something?” She had no idea what he did.

“I wish I could tell you, but I can’t.”

She was glad he couldn’t see her blush. “I’m sorry. I was only making conversation.”

“I know, love, but I really can’t tell you.” She heard him let the air out of his lungs. “I just miss you, Maddie. Is everything going all right?”

“Did you just call me ‘love?’” She pressed the phone to her ear.

“I guess I did.” There was that low chuckle again. “Is that all right?” He didn’t wait for her

response. “You *are* a love, Maddie. I knew that the first moment you fell into my arms.”

Maddie relived the moment and smiled to herself. “I did, didn’t I? I mean fall into your arms.” She lowered her voice. “Something I’d like to try again, by the way. Except maybe not from a ladder.”

He groaned. “Maddie, you’re killing me here.” Some machinery clanged in the background. “Just a sec.” He must have pressed the phone against his jacket because for a few moments, there was no sound. Then he was back. “Sorry, love. I have to go. Have you looked for the dog yet?”

“I thought you wanted to go with me.”

“I did, but with things the way they are, maybe you should go ahead and choose one. Listen, I really do have to run. I’ll try to call you when I’m on my way home, okay?”

“Okay, Brent. Thanks for calling.” He didn’t hear the last few words; he’d already disconnected.

* * *

“Do you want to go for a drink after work?”

The question took Maddie by surprise. Lily rarely wanted to go out for a drink. But tomorrow was the fashion show, and her friend had been increasingly nervous the past few days.

“Sure. Where would you like to go?”

“I’ll stop by, and we can go to one of those small places near you. Okay?”

“Sure. Give me an extra half an hour though. It’s been crazy here today.” She glanced at the colourful gift baskets on the shelves. Every one of them was now sold; Zelda was already working on putting some replacements together.

The beginnings of an idea had been taking root in her mind over the past couple of weeks. She’d opened in the middle of November, and here she was, well into December and her business was already taking her in directions she hadn’t anticipated.

The gift baskets had been wildly successful. Baskets containing food and wine were by far the most popular. Maddie had discovered a small European deli that offered many exclusive items, and the sale of baskets containing products from the deli had resulted in discussions with several customers about catering ideas for small receptions. She’d also had customers who were eager for assistance with party decorations. They were either too busy or lacked the confidence to do it

themselves. Zelda consulted enthusiastically with these customers, offering unique ideas that were eagerly snapped up.

“We could offer this as a service,” Zelda said after the last consultation. “I’d love to do something like that.” She started to gnaw on her fingernail then quickly withdrew her hand. Her previously bitten nails were beginning to grow, thanks to Maddie’s positive influence. “The gift buying will always be popular, but I see it as a series of highs and lows. We have Valentine’s Day, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, individual birthdays, and perhaps some limited demand on the other holidays, but basically it’s a rollercoaster.”

Maddie listened to her assistant with growing surprise. The young woman had also been thinking. She’d looked around their little shop. “This has been an ideal location to launch the business, but if we were to get into this full time, we’d need more space.” She looked at Maddie. “Don’t you think?”

Maddie had been so overwhelmed with the volume of orders, she hadn’t had time to think very far ahead, but Zelda was right. They’d have to have a serious discussion in the next couple of weeks.

* * *

Lily pushed through the revolving door, bringing with her a swirling gust of cold air and snowflakes. Breathtakingly glamorous, she strode across the lobby in soft leather boots, wearing a simple black cape trimmed with black fur.

“Ready?” she asked, frowning slightly as she looked at Maddie. “You look tired.”

“It’s been crazy busy.” Maddie locked up the shop. “I’m glad the weekend is coming up. Did I tell you I’m going to look for the puppy?”

Lily wrinkled her nose. “It’s not going to live with us, is it?”

“Maybe for a day or two. I haven’t thought that far ahead yet.” The two women walked out arm in arm. “Come on, let’s get that drink.”

Heads turned as they walked into a small bar and claimed two stools.

“Martini please,” said Lily.

Maddie masked her surprise. Something was bothering her friend if she was ordering a martini.

She ordered a glass of white wine. “So, how’s it going?” she asked, watching Lily carefully as she dug into the bowl of peanuts.

“Fine, as far as I’m concerned.” Lily removed the olive from her glass, but didn’t drink. She ran a finger up and down the stem of the glass, lost in thought. “There’s something going on with the women in charge of the fashion show, but I’m not sure what it is.” She glanced quickly at Maddie, then went back to playing with the martini glass. “They’ve decided they don’t like me, but I’ll be damned if I can figure out why. They don’t even know me.”

Maddie frowned. It wasn’t like Lily to care what people thought or said about her. “What have they done that’s made you think this?”

Lily took a sip of her drink and looked at Maddie over the rim of the glass. “That’s just it. They haven’t done anything specific. It’s just a feeling I have.” She set down her glass. “They’re being overly polite to me.” She toyed with her hair. “Instinct tells me it has something to do with Chase. It’s almost as if they’re trying to keep a secret from me.”

“Have you talked to Chase? What does he say?”

“That’s just it.” Lily’s gaze turned inward; it was almost as though she was talking to herself. “I haven’t heard from Chase since he brought Annie to the studio.”

“That seems odd.”

Lily nodded. “I thought so too.”

Lily thought for a moment. “Who are you dealing with?”

“Her name is Nancy Somerville.”

“Maybe she’s dating Chase and she’s wondering where you came from.”

“No…” Lily drew out the word. “She’s married to a friend of his. I think they play handball together or something.” She tossed back her drink and held up a finger for another one. “At least it’ll be over tomorrow, and we can laugh about how foolish I’m being.” She gave Maddie a thin smile.

“You’re right.” Maddie tossed another peanut into her mouth. “It’s going to be just fine.”

Chapter Twelve

Chase had ordered a limo service for the evening. He hoped to take Lily out after the auction and didn't want to worry about having a glass or two of wine. She buzzed him up to her condo, and he stood outside her door, as nervous as a teenager on a first date. He took a deep breath and pushed the doorbell.

She took a step back, inviting him in. The look on her face made the trouble he'd taken with his appearance worthwhile. "You look fantastic," she said.

"Why, thank you, ma'am." He gave a slight bow. "You look mighty fine yourself." He wasn't sure how she did it; she sparkled in a simple black beaded dress that hung from her shoulders, skimming her body in the most erotic manner. Her hair hung luxuriantly down her back, and he clenched his hands to prevent himself from touching her.

"Shall we go?" he said, reaching for her coat.

She indicated that she wanted it draped over her shoulders, and he complied. His fingers brushed her bare skin, and a jolt of awareness rocked him back. It had been all he could do not to call her, but he knew she'd been busy with the fashion show and hadn't wanted to pressure her. He regretted that now...time missed with this alluring woman could never be recovered.

He stood next to her in the elevator, unsure what to talk about. He finally decided on the fashion show; that could hardly go wrong.

"So," he said. "Has Nancy been taking care of you all right?"

He watched her in the mirrored walls of the elevator, and she met his gaze. "I got the impression that she wasn't thrilled to have the order of her fashion show disturbed, but she's been welcoming and polite."

The elevator door opened, and they walked into the lobby. "Just polite?" He wanted to gather her up in his arms and tell her to ignore any slights, but he knew that she was fiercely independent and could fight her own battles. The notion made him want her even more.

She laid a hand on his arm. "Everyone was fine." Something flashed in her eyes. "They're just being women." She stopped as they approached the waiting limousine. "For us?"

He nodded.

“I like it. Let’s go.”

Gliding silently through the city streets, Chase felt right with Lily at his side. She glanced up at him a couple of times but didn’t speak. He liked that. Too many women chattered on endlessly, but this one was different, and he looked forward to having her at his side tonight.

“I probably won’t get to spend much time with you,” she said, almost as though she’d read his thoughts. “The fashion show is going to start part way through dinner, and I’ll have to be backstage.”

“Oh, I thought we’d be together.”

His disappointment was obvious, and she slipped her hand into his. “I’m sorry, Chase. I thought you knew.”

He lifted her hand to his lips. “But I will get to see you some time tonight, won’t I?”

“Of course.” She touched the side of his face with her fingers. Her touch was feather-light and yet it turned his insides to fire. “We’ll find each other.”

* * *

Lily’s respect for Chase grew as they entered the function room. He was greeted enthusiastically, and everyone complimented him on the success of his charity. It soon became evident that he was the main contributor, and that it was thanks to him that the charity was so successful. Many of the businessmen pledged to help in ways that went beyond the scope of the evening’s fund-raising effort. Chase accepted their support with thanks.

As they moved along, greeting Chase’s friends and colleagues, she was aware of a few raised eyebrows and whispered asides. She supposed it was natural; after all, Chase had known these people most of his adult life and was now introducing someone completely new—her—into the mix. There were bound to be murmurs. Most of the people were gracious and welcoming, especially when Chase introduced her as a donor and detailed her contribution to the fashion show.

She liked the way he guided her through the crowd, one hand lightly at her waist. She smiled up at him as he offered her a glass of champagne, surprised to discover that she was enjoying herself.

It was difficult to do otherwise with someone like Chase; his dark good looks drew the eye of almost every woman in the room. His tailored suit fitted him perfectly, and he moved with an easy grace through the crowds, his smile never wavering as he looked down at her.

She was about to take a second sip of champagne when one of the backstage volunteers slipped through the crowd and tugged at her elbow.

“Sorry to bother you, Lily, but we have a problem backstage.” The young woman looked at Chase, and for a moment her eyes widened in appreciation, then she turned back to Lily. “It’s Melanie. I think she’s sick.”

Lily frowned. Melanie was one of the models who had been chosen for the resort wear. “I’ll be right there,” she murmured quietly, and waited for a break in the conversation until she could draw Chase away.

“There seems to be a problem with one of the models.” She kept her voice low.

“Shall I call a doctor?” he lowered his head to speak to her, and she struggled to maintain her concentration when his cologne invaded her senses. For one wild moment, she was tempted to kiss him. He stilled, and their eyes met; he was thinking the same thing.

“No.” She had to touch him. She laid a hand on his starched shirt-front; his heart was beating as rapidly as hers. “At least not yet. I’ll go and see what’s wrong.” She looked into his eyes. “Bad timing, huh?”

He looked at her for a few long seconds, his gaze moving from her eyes to her lips. She didn’t think she’d ever been subjected to such intense scrutiny, and she loved it. “I’ll wait,” he said simply, then leaned down and brushed his lips against her cheek. “If it takes all night.”

Head spinning, she made her way through the crowd. If Chase Drummond could affect her like this with one simple kiss on the cheek, she wasn’t sure she was ready for what would happen when he kissed her properly.

By the time she reached the backstage area, she had herself under control. “Where is she?” she asked, then spotted the young woman at the back of the room. She was sitting on one of the folding chairs that had been brought in, hands to her stomach, rocking back and forth.

She looked up, eyes bleak. “I’m sorry, Lily. I should have warned you. I got a touch of the flu a

couple of days ago, but I really thought I'd be better by now." Her forehead glistened with sweat.

"I felt okay this morning, but just in the last half hour I've been vomiting again. I feel terrible letting you down like this." A tear rolled down her cheek, and Lily brushed it away.

"Don't be silly," she said, sitting down beside the distraught young woman. "You're the one who matters. Do you have anyone at home to take care of you?"

She nodded. "My roommate."

"Excellent." Lily looked around for the volunteer, and called her over. "Could you ask Mr. Drummond to meet me over there?" She pointed toward the side door, then returned her attention to Melanie. "Mr. Drummond offered to call a doctor. Would you like him to do that?"

She shook her head. "No, I'll be fine if I just go home and lie down."

"That's what I thought, too. We'll get you a ride home." She looked up to see Chase hovering at the side door.

"It's the flu," she said quietly. "Can you arrange for her to get home?"

He nodded. "You bundle her up and bring her to the front door. I'll have some transportation for you by the time you get there."

The limousine was waiting at the entrance when Lily brought Melanie out. Chase settled her in the back seat then leaned through the front window to speak to the driver. The car pulled away, and he tucked his arm around Lily, guiding her back inside the building.

"Larry will take care of her and report to us later on."

"Thank you, Chase." She smiled at him. She'd been doing a lot of that tonight. And to think that she'd almost missed out on knowing Chase Drummond because of her experience with Randall.

They wandered back down the side hall, and she paused outside the room that had been assigned to the models. "You realize what this means, don't you?"

He lifted his shoulders. "No, what?"

"I'm short one model, and I don't dare ask Nancy to re-arrange things. The music...everything...it's all been co-ordinated down to the last minute."

"Music?" he looked puzzled. "Just how involved is this thing, anyway?"

She gave a short laugh. "You'll see. Each series of clothes has its own theme music. Nancy has

this organized with military precision.” She paused. “She’s really very good at this.”

“So you can’t just leave something out?” He motioned with his hand. “Her outfit, or whatever you call it?”

“Not really.” Lily’s mind was racing. “I suppose I could stand in for her.” She wound a strand of hair around her fingers. “We’re about the same size, and I’ve been here for both rehearsals.”

He gave her a wry smile. “Don’t I get to spend any time with you tonight?” The look on his face made her heart beat double-time. “I’ve been looking forward to this ever since you said you’d come with me.”

“Are you pouting?” She took a step closer and challenged him. “I’ve been looking forward to this evening too, if you really want to know.” She read the desire in his eyes. “We’ll get there, Chase. You can count on it.”

With a groan of frustration, he cradled her head in his hands and captured her mouth with his. She closed her eyes and leaned into him, moaning softly as his long, lean body moulded to hers.

He pulled away abruptly. “Lily,” he said, his voice hoarse. “I’m sorry.” He pulled a white handkerchief out of his pocket and dabbed at a smear of lipstick on her mouth.

“I’m not,” she said, and raised her head for another kiss. His mouth plundered hers, and he wrapped her in his arms and lifted her off her feet. She was vaguely aware of some beads from her dress falling to the floor, but she didn’t care. Right here in Chase Drummond’s arms was where she was meant to be.

“Excuse me.” Nancy stood in the open door behind them, taking in the scene. A faint smile touched her lips. “Sorry to disturb, but I heard about Melanie.” She couldn’t quite look at Chase. “Have you decided what you’re going to do?”

Chase let her go, and she reluctantly turned around. “I’m going to do the modeling myself.”

“You?” The look on Nancy’s face was one of disbelief. She looked up and down, assessing Lily’s height. “Won’t the skirt be too long?”

Lily smiled brightly. “I made it in three sizes. We’ll make it work.”

“That’s wonderful.” Nancy’s relief was obvious, even to Chase. The two women seemed to

have bonded over the mini disaster.

Lily turned. "Sorry, Chase."

Nancy echoed her words. "Sorry, Chase, but you know what they say. The show must go on."

Lily's eyes sparkled. "Don't worry about him. He's a big boy." She took a couple of steps back toward him. "You might want to wipe off the lipstick."

And then she and Nancy disappeared into the change room. Women chattered and flitted back and forth between racks of brightly coloured clothes; it didn't look like a military operation to him.

He turned to go back to the ballroom and spotted a few beads on the floor. He thought he'd heard something when he picked Lily up, but he'd been too overwhelmed by the feel and taste of her to register what it was. He picked them up now and held them in his palm. Made of cut crystal, they sparkled when he moved his hand to catch the light. He slipped them into his pocket, put a smile on his face and went back to mingle with the guests.

* * *

Lily studied the outfit. Ideally, it should be modeled by someone taller...someone like Melanie...but she'd make it work somehow. She could always put her hair up, to give the illusion of extra height.

She inspected the hair and makeup area, looking for something to hold up her hair. She was rarely without her chopsticks, but tonight she'd brought a small evening bag. After several failed attempts, she used some long hairpins to fasten it up; it would have to do.

The shorter skirt of the small outfit just barely skimmed the floor when she donned heels. Struggling to fit into a 'normal' size reminded her of her teenage years, and why she'd started designing and sewing in the first place. Nothing in the stores had ever fit, but she was determined not to shop in the childrens' section for the rest of her life and had learned to adjust patterns to suit her stature.

She was standing behind a rack of clothes, checking her appearance in a full-length mirror when an unfamiliar voice caught her attention.

"Where is she?" the woman demanded. "I want to talk to her."

"Laurel, no." Lily recognized Nancy's firm voice. "The fashion show is about to start." There

were sounds of someone stumbling. “Come on now. Please don’t ruin this after all our hard work.”

Lily peeked through a rack of clothes. A tall, elegant woman stood opposite Nancy. Hair the colour of ripe summer wheat was twisted up in a loose French twist at the back of her head. She was holding an empty champagne glass, and from the way she listed slightly to one side, Lily wondered if she’d had too much to drink.

“I just wanted to warn her,” the woman continued. “It’s not fair the way Chase breaks their hearts, one after the other.” She raised the glass to her lips and frowned when she discovered it was empty. “I mean, everybody knows he likes to try something different every once in a while, but he always comes back to me.” She prodded Nancy in the shoulder. “And you have to admit, this one is definitely different.”

Lily’s first inclination was to push through the clothes and confront the woman. But there was something desperate in the way she spoke, and it was becoming clear that she’d had too much to drink. She remained still as Nancy ushered the woman out of the room, but her heart was beating wildly. How was this woman involved with Chase, and was there any truth to what she’d overheard?

She raised a hand and saw that it was trembling from the effort to control her emotions. The truth was, she was angry with herself for not going out there and fighting for her man.

The thought stopped her in her tracks. When had she started to think of Chase as her man? She scarcely knew him, and yet, he’d invaded her thoughts and dreams to such an extent that she hadn’t been able to think of much else. There was no denying the attraction between them, but he was far from being ‘her man.’ He had a life of which she knew nothing, a life which had obviously included this woman named Laurel.

She exhaled all the air from her lungs in a slow stream and took a deep breath. Somewhere in the background she recognized the distinctive music that went with the group of clothes preceding hers. As she came out from behind the rack of clothes, she spotted Nancy coming back into the room. For a moment their eyes met, and Lily caught a hint of embarrassment on the other woman’s face before she looked away. It was too late to do anything about that now; Lily joined the small group of women modeling her clothes and spoke a few words of encouragement.

Before she knew it, it was her turn to stride down the runway. She was proud of her resort line, and had been gratified to hear enthusiastic applause for the first several models. Carefully choreographed salsa music was her cue, and she stepped out, momentarily blinded by the lights. Her early years of ignoring taunts and jibes stood her in good stead now, and she walked confidently, eyes quickly adjusting to the light.

Directly ahead, at what must be the best table in the house, Chase smiled up at her. Something in his expression was strained, and it didn't take long to figure out what it was. Beside him sat the woman who had come into the change room. Sitting next to Chase, she had her arm possessively through his, and was leaning into him, whispering something in his ear.

Lily felt a sudden chill as she watched the woman brush her lips against Chase's neck. Something in her mind shut down; it was as though she was a spectator, completely removed from what was happening in front of her. As she came to the end of the runway he gave a quick, negative shake of his head, as though to warn her not to believe what she was seeing. She ignored him and kept her eyes focused somewhere at the back of the room. If she met his gaze now, he would surely see how hurt she was. She gave a brilliant smile and turned to join the other models holding their poses across the top of the stage.

It seemed to take forever for the rest of her models to strut their stuff. She feigned an interest she didn't feel, and it took every ounce of control she possessed not to run from the stage when their segment was over.

Tears spilled from her eyes, and she brushed them away angrily. She wasn't sure if she was angry at herself for giving way, or at Chase for allowing that woman to crawl all over him. A small shake of the head did not make up for letting the entire audience see her snuggling up to him.

She undressed quickly, careful not to damage the clothes. She'd noticed a lot of the spectators jotting down the numbers of the clothes that interested them. At least that part of the evening had been successful.

Nancy caught her just as she was slipping out the back door. The woman looked torn, and for a moment Lily felt sorry for her. "Listen, Lily. I'm sorry." She didn't need to elaborate; both of them

knew what she was talking about.

Lily was in no condition to have this discussion, and yet she could see that the other woman was sincere. She forced her features to relax and smiled. "Thank you, Nancy." She held eye contact for a moment longer then slipped out the side door.

"Lily." Chase loomed over her in the dimly lit hallway. "Please. Let me explain."

She looked up at him. He looked miserable. "I don't think so, Chase." She turned away before she gave in. He stared after her for a moment, then followed her down the hall.

"Lily, please. I'm not with her." He raked a hand through his hair then let his arm fall to his side. "I'm not," he repeated.

She stopped abruptly and turned to face him. "You could have fooled me."

He raised his hands in a helpless gesture. "This is awkward," he said.

She didn't try to hide her anger. "Oh, and it's not awkward for me? Seeing my date with some other woman wrapped around him? How do you think that made me feel?"

"That's not what I meant." He spoke slowly.

She looked at him expectantly. She wasn't going to make this easy for him.

"You see, Laurel is a spoiled little rich girl. Her father owns the largest newspaper in town."

Lily raised an eyebrow. "We all know what's happening to newspapers these days."

"No, trust me. Harry Carmichael is doing just fine." He took a deep breath. "I made the mistake of dating her a few times." He paused. "I guess that was about a year and a half ago. Anyway, Laurel always gets what she wants, and she decided she wanted me."

"I can't imagine why." Lily's lips twitched.

"Don't tell me you're jealous." A slow smile transformed his face.

Why did he have to be so damned appealing? She felt her resolve weakening. "Never mind; just carry on."

"The trouble is, we belong to the same clubs, and we know the same people. It seemed that every time I went somewhere she'd show up and attach herself to me. Somewhere along the way she convinced herself that we're a couple." He reached for her. "We're not, Lily."

She pulled away. "Then why didn't you stop her?"

He looked into her eyes. “Because she’d been drinking, and she’s been known to make a scene when she drinks. Our families have been friends for a long time, and I couldn’t let her embarrass herself like that.” He shrugged. “I’d do it again out of respect for her family, but I’m still sorry it happened.”

She wondered how he would react if she told him what she’d overheard but she was too proud to admit that she’d been eavesdropping.

The last of her anger slipped away; she was suddenly drained. “Okay, but I still think I’ll leave.”

“I’ll take you home.”

“You can’t do that. This is your big event.” She gestured toward the banquet room. “Get in there and take their money.”

He laughed. “I have people doing that.” He glanced at her small evening bag. “I’ll bet you didn’t even bring any money for a cab.”

She bit off a reply. He was right; she hadn’t thought she’d need money tonight. “You could just put me in the limo. I’ll be fine.”

“No way.” He took out his cell phone and spoke into it. “He’ll be out front in a minute. I’ll get my overcoat and meet you out there.” He lowered his head and gave her a quick kiss. “Don’t run off.”

Like that’s going to happen, she told herself as she watched him walk away. It wouldn’t take much for Chase Drummond to become a habit. Not much at all. She released the pins in her hair and let it fall down her back.

Chapter Thirteen

Chase settled her in the limo then leaned forward to speak to the driver. “How was Melanie? Did you get her home all right?”

“Yes, sir. I walked her up to her door and made sure her roommate was home.” He glanced back over his shoulder. “The roommate seemed like a level-headed girl. Actually, she’s a nurse.”

“Good.” Chase sat back with a sigh and pushed the button to raise the privacy window. “Some night, huh?” He hooked a finger in his collar then turned to her. “Do you mind if I loosen my shirt?”

“Not at all.” Her pulse raced as he loosened his tie and opened the top button of his shirt. To her way of thinking there was something sensually appealing about a man with his shirt loosened. And when he looked at her like that, it was even moreso.

“You’ve let your hair down.” His voice was low and husky. “It looks nice like that.” He put his arm around her, and she relaxed against him.

She liked sitting here in the semi-dark with him. The subdued lighting created an intimate atmosphere, a place where secrets could be shared.

“Why are men so fascinated with long hair?” she asked dreamily.

“I don’t know.” His fingertips brushed against the top of her head. “Maybe it’s because we traditionally wear short hair. It’s sensual and it’s something different.”

She chuckled softly. “You’ve been fascinated with my hair ever since the first day we met.”

He pulled back and looked at her, but there was no denial in his eyes as he lifted a handful of the silken strands. “You’re right, but it was more than your hair that fascinated me.” He let the hair slip through his fingers. “That first day we met, I saw a woman I wanted to get to know.” He tightened his arm around her shoulders. “Don’t ask me how I knew, but I could tell that you’re independent, you’re a clever businesswoman, and that you dislike men who can’t see past your beauty.” He lowered his voice and lightly turned her face toward him. “I could also see that you’d been hurt by a man at some time, and I hated him. I hated him, and yet I was thankful that he was such a loser.”

She turned away, unsure if she was ready to have him delve so deeply. Especially when he was

right. “You were thankful?” She tossed his words back at him.

“Yes, because that meant you weren’t involved. There was hope for me.”

She turned to him and studied his face. He really was the most deliciously handsome man she’d ever met. And yet tonight she had seen another side of him. She’d only been here in Calgary for a few years, but Chase had grown up here, a member of a wealthy family, respected in the business community and pursued by at least one determined woman. Something told her that becoming involved with Chase Drummond might overshadow her business, and she couldn’t allow that to happen. She’d worked too hard to build it up to throw it all away now and become arm candy for this exciting man.

“What do you want from me, Chase?” She couldn’t believe she’d said that, but there was too much at stake. “What is it about me that attracts you?”

He slipped a hand around the back of her neck and ran his fingers through her hair again. It shimmered in the dim light, and he focused on it intently before returning his attention to her face.

“Everything about you attracts me, Lily.” He brushed the pad of his thumb against her lips, his hand trembling. “You ask me what I want from you. I want everything. But first I want to get to know you. I want to spend time with you. I want you to meet my parents when they come home for our family Christmas.” He grinned. “They’re leaving on a round-the-world cruise in January, so they’re only staying a few days.” He lifted her hand and brought it to his lips. “You’ll like them, Lily. They’re good people.”

It was everything she wanted to hear and yet it seemed almost too good to be true. She stared down at their intertwined hands. “Are any more women going to claim you? I’m not fond of sharing my men.”

“Am I your man?” He said it with such delight that she had to smile. “No. I can assure you that no other women are going to claim me.” He tipped up her chin. “I’ve found the one I want.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Drummond, we’re here.” Chase looked out through the tinted windows. They were parked in front of Lily’s condo; he had no idea how long they’d been there.

“Thank you, Larry.”

The driver got out, opened the door and stood a few feet away. Chase offered her his hand and relished the thrill of awareness that spiked through his body at her touch.

They stood side by side in the elevator. Now that the evening was coming to an end, he didn't want to let her go, and yet he really should get back to the fundraiser.

"Thank you for everything," he said as they walked the short distance to her door. "Your clothes were amazing."

"Thank you," she said, digging her key out of her bag. He took the key from her, opened the door and handed it back to her.

"Would you like to come in for a nightcap?"

He shook his head regretfully, then gestured toward town. "Sorry, I really should get back."

"I thought you said—" She caught herself. "I understand."

He wondered if she did. Did she really understand what it took to walk away from her tonight? It was the last thing he wanted to do, and yet he'd already breached etiquette by leaving the fundraiser.

"I'll call you," he said softly and waited for a response. He wasn't sure if she'd heard, because her head was down and she didn't respond. "Will that be okay?"

She raised her head, and he thought he caught a hint of tears in her eyes. They were so dark and luminous it was difficult to tell. "Yes," she whispered. "That will be fine."

He lowered his head to kiss her and then stopped just before their lips met. She closed the gap, and with a groan of frustration he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against his body. She was small, delicate, and soft in all the right places. When their lips met, he knew for sure that this was the woman he wanted. She kissed the way she lived; she held nothing back. Fireworks exploded in his head, and his body trembled with need as he released her.

"Wow," he said, touching his forehead to hers. "I'd better leave, or I'm never getting out of here."

She nodded, then grabbed his shirtfront and pulled him in for another kiss. When they finally parted, he staggered backward, gave her a small wave and started down the hall.

"Chase?"

He looked back.

She pointed in the other direction. “The elevator is that way.” Was that a smug smile on her face? He didn’t care. He would willingly put up with a lot to be kissed like that.

* * *

Lily tossed her evening bag on the counter and walked to the plate glass window, her heart still pounding from the intensity of his kiss. Moments later, she saw him exit the building and climb into the limousine. It pulled out, taking him away.

Her thoughts went back to the fundraiser. Would that woman still be there? What was her name? Laurel? She turned away from the window, relieved that Maddie had gone to bed. She didn’t feel like talking tonight. Tonight was for remembering the way he looked at her, the taste of his kisses. Tomorrow and reality would come soon enough.

* * *

Chase leaned back and closed his eyes. After what Laurel had pulled tonight, he was lucky that Lily was still talking to him. Her scent still clung to his clothes, and he breathed in deeply, wishing he was with her right now. He wondered if she was aware how difficult it had been for him to walk away.

The more he saw of her, the more he was convinced that Lily was the woman for him. He’d known it from the first moment he laid eyes on her, but now he was even surer. A groan of frustration escaped his lips. Not physical frustration, although there was plenty of that to go around. No, he was frustrated by the fact that he’d chosen to withhold information from her. Information that could destroy their fragile relationship. If he could only make it through the weekend without any more mishaps, the way should be clear to pursue Lily. It was a pleasurable thought, and he was smiling as he stepped out of the limo at the hotel.

“Chase, old man, I was wondering where you’d disappeared to.” Nate slapped him on the back and glanced behind him.

He knew his friend was looking for Lily. “I took her home,” he explained, scanning the crowd. “Laurel left, as well. Nancy got one of her friends to drive her home.” Nate lowered his voice.

“She was looking all over the place for you. Kept muttering something about the wedding next weekend.”

Chase gritted his teeth, and Nate nodded knowingly. “Can’t get out of it, huh?”

“Nope.” Chase smiled at a departing couple. “Thanks for coming,” he called, then turned back to his friend. “I should know better than to make a commitment that far in advance.”

His friend was watching him carefully. “You really like her, huh?”

Chase nodded slowly. “I think she’s the one, Nate.”

“I thought so. You’ve done nothing but talk about her for the past several weeks, but after seeing you together tonight, I’ve gotta tell you, man. I’ve never seen you like that with a woman.”

“That’s because I’ve never met a woman like this before.”

His friend rolled his eyes. “Then good luck. That’s all I can say.”

* * *

Zelda breezed into the lobby, carrying two coffees. “Good morning, David.” She’d adopted Maddie’s habit of greeting the concierge every morning.

He grinned broadly. “Good morning, sunshine. How’s business?”

The young woman walked backward, talking as she went. “Fantastic. Thanks for the leads yesterday.” She paused. “Do you need any more business cards?”

David pulled out a drawer and looked inside. “I’m fine for now. Have a good day.”

“Thanks.” She walked to the shop and handed a coffee to Maddie. “Good morning, boss. I have another idea.”

Maddie looked up from her scheduling book. She’d left home even before Lily got up this morning in the hopes of reviewing her appointments for the next few days. Somehow she’d made the mistake of scheduling three appointments this morning and was wondering how she would fit them all in. She’d thought that orders would slow down this close to Christmas, but they kept pouring in. There were times when Zelda’s enthusiasm tired her out, but her ideas were usually good. “What is it?”

“I went to the grocery store last night. You know that fancy new one over on the east side?”

Maddie frowned. What did grocery shopping have to do with gift wrapping?

“In their bakery department, they have a special area set up where the customers can watch cakes being assembled and decorated. You should have seen the crowd of people watching.” She took a quick breath. “So, I was thinking. “What if we set up a special time and let it be known that I’ll be giving free demonstrations and tips on gift wrapping?” She held up a hand. “Before you say no, I’ve thought about it, and we wouldn’t lose any business. People who would come to a demonstration wouldn’t pay for our services anyway, but it would be great publicity.”

Maddie held up the appointment book. “I don’t know if we can handle any more business.”

“We’ll do it, even if I have to work extra hours. If you decide to run this business after the Christmas season, we’ll need all the customers we can get.” She picked up her coffee then set it back down. “Are you okay, Mads? You look down.”

Maddie gave her a wry smile. The young woman was bright and energetic, but she was also amazingly intuitive. She took a sip of coffee. “It’s just that I haven’t heard from Brent.” She gazed longingly at her phone. “I don’t even know when he’s coming back for Christmas.”

“Can’t you call him?”

Maddie smiled wistfully. “No. Call me old-fashioned, but I can’t. I’ve thought about it a million times, but something inside tells me to wait until he contacts me.”

“He will.”

Maddie wished she shared Zelda’s confidence. She glanced at her watch and jumped up. “I’d better run. My first appointment is in ten minutes.” She threw a long scarf around her neck. “Go ahead on the demonstration, as long as you don’t spend too much money on advertising it.”

Zelda brightened. “I’m not going to spend anything.” She held up the cell phone they used for the business. “We have a following on Facebook and Twitter already, and my roomie has a popular blog.” She dragged out a notebook and a pen. “I’ll get started.”

* * *

Maddie dragged herself back to the shop around one in the afternoon.

“I still can’t believe that people are willing to spend so much on Christmas gifts,” she said, kicking off her shoes and rubbing her feet. “I’d say it’s disgusting, but having that much flexibility with a budget makes my job a lot easier.”

“I suppose so, but it doesn’t make people happier.” Zelda looked wistful. “When you were a kid did you make your own decorations at home? You know, paper chains for the Christmas tree and all that?” She pulled up the clear cellophane around a gift basket, deftly tied a ribbon and curled the ends.

Maddie thought back to happy times, working on the kitchen table while her mother supervised. “Yeah. And mucilage.” She smiled. “Remember mucilage? Remember how it always hardened around the rubber tip and you had to chip it off to get it to work the next time?”

Zelda stopped what she was doing. “Speaking of childhood memories, I just remembered. Annie stopped by. School’s out early today.”

Maddie instinctively looked around, although she knew the child wasn’t there. “I’m sorry I missed her.”

“She said she’ll be back, and that she had something to show you.”

Maddie smiled. “Probably something she made at school.”

“She was quite...” Zelda stopped mid-sentence. “Speak of the devil. Look who’s back already.”

“Maddie!” Annie ran through the lobby, her backpack on one arm and a shopping bag on the other. “I’ve missed you.”

Maddie gave the child a big hug. Annie’s cheeks were cold, and her eyes sparkled with excitement. “I’ve been shopping,” she stated proudly.

“Buying Christmas presents?” Maddie eyed the bag; it wasn’t from a store she recognized.

“No. I bought something for myself.” Annie placed her backpack on the floor and opened the bag. “It’s the picture!” She smiled at it. “It’s the one I took of you and Uncle Brent that day at the rink. Remember? I bought a frame for it so I can keep it in my bedroom.” She looked up with trusting eyes. “It’s my happy picture.”

Maddie could scarcely see the picture through the sudden onslaught of tears. “I remember.” She touched the glass that covered Brent’s face. “I remember everything about that day.”

“Maddie, why are you crying?”

She gave her head a quick shake. “I’m not crying. Not really.” A tear rolled down her cheek, and

she realized how ridiculous that must sound. "I think I must be tired. That's all." She stroked the child's fine hair. "It's a lovely picture, Annie."

Her stomach growled. No wonder she was getting emotional. She hadn't eaten today except for half a muffin this morning. "Shall we go for tea?" She turned to Zelda. "You don't mind, do you? Have you had lunch?"

"I brought a sandwich from home. You guys go, but bring me a chai, okay?" She reached for Annie's backpack. "Here, I'll hold onto that for you."

Annie scooted out from behind the shop and came to a standstill. All expression left her face as she watched a woman crossing the lobby. Maddie turned in time to see an elegantly dressed woman walking toward them. Perfectly made up, she looked like she'd stepped out of the pages of a fashion magazine.

"Cynthia." Annie's greeting couldn't have been less enthusiastic if she'd tried.

"Hello, Munchkin."

Maddie winced as she heard Brent's favourite name for his niece on the lips of this woman.

The other woman gave her a frosty glare. Recognition flared in her eyes, but it was soon replaced by dislike. So this was the woman who was linked with Chase. Maddie almost laughed aloud; she was no match for Lily.

"What do you have there?" She reached for the shopping bag, but Annie pulled it back. "For heaven's sake child, let me see." Her tone was sharp, and it was all Maddie could do to hold her tongue.

Annie slowly reached a hand into the bag and drew out the picture. She passed it to the woman without a word.

She studied the picture for a moment, then handed it back dismissively. "Oh yes, I've seen that." A smirk played around her lips as she backed up in front of Maddie's shop and read the sign. "I'd forgotten about your little venture." She removed a glove and held out her hand. "I suppose we should introduce ourselves. I take it you're Maddie?"

Maddie took the offered hand and cold fingers of dread inexplicably crept down her back. "Yes. Maddie LaRocque." She tried to smile.

“Nice to meet you.” She withdrew her hand as though it might be contaminated. “I’m Cynthia Fairbairn. Brent’s fiancée.”

Chapter Fourteen

“I’m sorry?” Maddie struggled to keep her composure. She looked quickly to Annie, then back at the woman in front of her, who was obviously enjoying herself.

“Oh, yes. Brent and I have been together for some time now.” She glanced down at Annie.

“Haven’t we?”

Annie shrugged.

Maddie felt as though she’d been punched in the gut. More than anything in the world, she wanted to run away and hide. She made an effort to say something, but her throat was closed up.

“Well,” Cynthia slapped the loose glove against her other hand. “It’s been lovely meeting you but I must dash. I’m on my way up to see Chase.” She looked down at Annie. “Are you coming?”

“No.” Annie edged closer to Maddie. “We’re going out for tea.”

“Enjoy yourselves then.” She gave Maddie one last triumphant look and walked over to the bank of elevators.

* * *

Maddie couldn’t remember walking to the coffee shop. Unusually quiet, Annie slipped her hand into hers as they walked. It wasn’t until they were sitting down at the front window with their drinks that either of them spoke.

“Maddie, are you all right? You look sick.” A frown creased Annie’s brow.

“What?” Maddie looked down at her coffee and wondered where it had come from. Was this the way it felt to be in shock? She warmed her hands on the cup and tried to smile. “I’m fine,” she said quickly. She searched her memory, trying to figure out how she could have been so wrong about Cynthia. Annie had mentioned her; it had been right here in the coffee shop, and they’d been talking about the fact that Annie wanted a sewing machine. The conversation came back to her as clearly as if it had just happened. ‘She’s my uncle’s girlfriend’, she’d said. The words taunted her now but it was easy to see how she could have been mistaken. She hadn’t known Brent at that point in time and had assumed that the uncle in question was Chase.

“That’s okay. She doesn’t like me, either.” Annie’s words were spoken so softly that Maddie

almost missed them. A silent tear rolled down the child's cheek. "I heard her on the phone a couple of weeks ago. She was telling her girlfriend that she has no intention of raising someone else's child."

"Oh, Annie." Maddie gathered the child in her arms. "She doesn't deserve you." She held her away and looked into her eyes. "This may not make sense right now, but it's not about you." She squeezed her arms gently. "It's about her. She's selfish, that's all." She put her arms around the child again and stroked her hair. "You're a wonderful child and she's..." She searched for a word she could use... "She's not a very nice person."

Annie shuddered. "Can we still be friends?"

"Of course we can."

Annie broke out of her embrace and drank some of her chai. On the sidewalk just outside the window, a young girl walked by with her mother. Their arms were full of shopping bags and they laughed as the girl said something. Annie watched them like a starving child looking at a plate of food.

Maddie had a sudden thought. "You don't have any school tomorrow, right?"

Annie nodded.

"Well, I was wondering if you would help me with some shopping. I have a customer who wants me to buy a puppy for his son. He wants a family dog, but I'm not very good at this. Would you come with me and help me pick one out?"

The child's eyes brightened. "That would be so cool. When can we go?" She stopped and gave Maddie a puzzled look. "Where will you keep it until Christmas?"

"I've been thinking about that. It will have to stay at the shelter until Christmas Eve, I guess, but it's not too soon to go and pick one out now." She pretended to think. "How about tomorrow afternoon?"

"Okay." She dug out her phone. "I'll call Uncle Chase and make sure it's okay with him." She grinned at Maddie as she waited.

"Uncle Chase?" She listened for a moment. "Yes, I'm at the coffee shop with Maddie." She shot

a curious look at Maddie. “No, just Maddie.” She muffled the phone against her sweater. “Lily isn’t coming, is she?”

Maddie shook her head.

“No, it’s just us. Is it okay if I go with Maddie tomorrow afternoon? She’s doing some special shopping and she needs my help.” She nodded as he spoke. “Yes, the school concert is in the morning and then we’re free for the rest of the holidays.” She nodded again. “Okay, I’ll tell her. Thank you, Uncle Chase.” She slipped the phone into her pocket. “He says he’ll have me back at your shop by noon tomorrow.”

“Perfect.” Maddie lifted her coffee cup, relieved to see that her hand was no longer shaking. The full impact of Cynthia’s revelation would no doubt sink in later, but she’d made it this far, and she would survive, even with a shredded heart. Thankfully the time between now and Christmas was going to be so busy she would scarcely have time to think about Brent Drummond.

* * *

Lily tossed the phone on her desk as though it had personally offended her. She’d been trying to get up the nerve to phone Chase all day. She glanced at the wall clock. If she didn’t do it soon, the day would be over. She could never call him at home, but she’d thought she’d be able to work up her nerve to call him at work.

“Okay, this is it.” She picked up the phone.

“Chase Drummond.” His voice was brisk and businesslike. She pictured him in his office.

“Chase, it’s Lily.”

“Lily!” He breathed her name into the phone. “I’ve been thinking about you all day.” He cleared his throat self-consciously. “Well, most of the day. It’s wonderful to hear from you.”

She was suddenly nervous. What if he said no? But then she wouldn’t find out until she asked.

“I was wondering if you’d like to go to a Flames game.” She picked up the tickets and looked at them as she spoke. “It’s on Saturday.” He’d never know how many strings she had to pull to get the tickets.

He groaned. “I’d love to go, but I can’t.” There was something odd in his voice but she couldn’t quite place it. “I have to go out of town for the weekend.”

“Oh.” She tossed the tickets on her desk, and they lay there, mocking her.

Chase didn't give her time to be disappointed. “But listen, I'm glad you called. Would you consider going to the Oilmen's Christmas party with me? It's next Thursday.” He gave a low, intimate chuckle. “I realize it's short notice and I meant to ask you last night, but things got kinda crazy there for a while.” He paused, and she wondered if he was recalling their kiss. She hadn't been able to think about much else all day.

“Please say you'll come. Dad always schedules their Christmas visit so he can go and touch base with all his old oil buddies. It'll be a great chance for you to meet them. And this is Annie's first year. I know she'd be thrilled if you would come.”

“I'd like that, Chase. Is it formal?”

“Very. Not only do they send out invitations, they check them at the door.” He gave a small snort of derision. “As if we don't all know each other. Anyway, it's always a fun evening.” His voice softened. “Will you be my date?”

“I'd like that.” She decided to go for it. “Will I talk to you again before the party?”

He hesitated for only a moment before he replied. “I'll call you early in the week. Mom and Dad arrive on the weekend, so things will be crazy at our place, but I'll talk to you before the party for sure.”

“Okay then. Have a good weekend.”

“I'll try. Goodnight, Lily.”

“Goodnight.” She set the phone down and stared at it. Something had happened during that conversation to make her uneasy, but she couldn't put her finger on it. Instead of being happy that he'd invited her to the most prestigious party of the year, she was edgy and unsure of herself.

“Stop it!” She spoke aloud. “You're seeing problems where none exist.” And yet she knew better. Her instinct rarely failed her, and warning bells were going off in her head. She picked up the hockey tickets and walked out to the production floor.

“Greta.” The woman's head came up. “Your husband is a Flames fan, right?”

“Oh yeah, he drives me crazy.” She deftly positioned another t-shirt for screening. “Him and my son. They're both crazy about the game.”

Lily waved the tickets and placed them on a nearby work table. “Two tickets for Saturday night. I hope he enjoys them.”

Greta and her husband had come to Calgary several years before. Both had only the barest knowledge of English. Johnny was a skilled mechanic and had quickly found a job. Greta had kept coming back and applying until Lily had finally hired her, and she had never regretted the decision. The woman was willing to work all hours, and her output was amazing. She inspected the t-shirt critically, picked off a piece of loose thread and smiled.

Greta nodded. “Thank you, Lily. And while we’re talking about hockey, please tell your Mr. Chase that we appreciate everything he does for the kids. We were able to get Bernie into a league because of him. He’s a good man.”

Lily nodded, her eyes suddenly full of tears. “I’ll do that,” she said and walked back into her office.

* * *

Lily picked up some wine and a few groceries after work and splurged on a cab. She exited and looked up, surprised to see that no lights were showing in the condo. As far as she knew, Maddie didn’t have anything scheduled for tonight, but she had mentioned how busy the shop had become. Perhaps she was working late.

She pushed open the door, dumped her purchases on the kitchen counter and flicked on the light. “Maddie?” Her roommate was sitting on the floor in the living room, arms clasped around raised knees. “Why are you sitting there in the dark?”

Maddie didn’t respond. She rocked back and forth, staring off into the distance.

Lily kicked off her shoes and sat down on the floor next to her friend. A tear rolled down Maddie’s face, and she hiccupped loudly. The movement seemed to jolt her awake and she turned to look at Lily.

“Do you remember when I told you Chase had a girlfriend?”

Lily’s heart jumped into her throat. Images from last night arose, and she fought to stay focused. Why would Maddie be crying over Chase’s girlfriend?

Maddie continued. “She’s not Chase’s girlfriend,” she said dully. She shook her head and went back to staring off into the distance. “She’s Brent’s girlfriend.” She tried to laugh, but the sound came out strangled. “His fiancée, actually.”

Lily’s head was spinning. “Laurel?”

Maddie pulled back. “Who’s Laurel?”

Lily felt as though she was mired in quicksand. “Who are you talking about?”

“Cynthia.”

“So...” Lily frowned as she tried to put the pieces together. “...when Annie said that Chase had a girlfriend she really meant Brent.”

“What she actually said was that her uncle had a girlfriend. I just assumed it was Chase because I didn’t know Brent existed at the time.” She pressed the fingers of one hand against her forehead. “She stopped by the shop today when Annie was there and introduced herself.” She looked around the room, her gaze coming to rest on various items without really seeing them. “You know what I don’t understand?” She didn’t wait for Lily’s response. “I don’t understand how Brent could be involved with someone like that. She doesn’t even like Annie, for goodness sake.” She hiccupped again. “She barely tolerates her.”

Lily leaned back against the couch. “What is it with these Drummond men?”

Maddie’s eyes widened. “Oh my God, Lily. You had the fashion show last night, and I forgot to ask about it. You must think I’m terrible.”

Lily shook her head. “Don’t be silly.” She slid a sideways glance at her friend. “Although it *was* interesting.” She got up and offered her friend a hand. “Come on, get up off the floor. Let’s have a glass of wine, and I’ll tell you all about it.”

* * *

Maddie studied her reflection in the mirror the next morning, surprised that she appeared normal. Thank goodness for Lily. She hadn’t tried to argue last night when her roommate insisted that she eat something. Lily was simply too strong-willed and her own energy had been at its lowest ebb for a few days now.

It was just as well that Brent wasn’t in town. She didn’t know what she might have said to him if

he bounced into the lobby today. She leaned against the bathroom counter, looked into her eyes and thought back to her time with him. He'd never actually said that he was single, and yet he'd led her to believe that he wanted to see more of her; that he'd be around in the future. How was he going to accomplish that if he was engaged? None of it made sense, and she was tired of thinking about it. She took a couple of deep breaths and tried to put it out of her mind. Today was going to be hectic enough without cluttering her mind with thoughts of Brent. If only it could be that easy.

* * *

Lily looked up from her drafting board. A courier was making his way through the production area. He knocked on her door, and she motioned for him to come inside.

“Sorry ma’am, but I need a signature.” He placed his delivery on her desk, and she smiled. A single white calla lily in an elegant bud vase. A small card was attached, and her fingers itched to reach for it, but the courier pulled out another item from his backpack, then offered his clipboard for her signature. She signed quickly, and as soon as he was out the door, she reached for the card.

“*Thinking of you. Chase.*” She was quite sure he'd signed it himself. The words were in a bold, slanting hand. She set the card aside and picked up the second item.

The cream coloured envelope could only contain an invitation.

Her name had been filled in by a skilled calligrapher. How had he managed to get all of this done so quickly? She shook the envelope and a folded piece of his personal stationery fell out.

You don't need this as we'll be together but I thought you might like it as a souvenir. Chase

She glanced at the bottom of the invitation. As he had indicated, it was to be formal. She wanted to look her best for him and already knew what she was going to wear. The only thing left to decide was whether to wear her hair up or down. She tucked the invitation into her bag and went back to work.

Chapter Fifteen

“Good morning, Boss.” Zelda eyed her tentatively. Maddie’s assistant had been wise enough to stay silent yesterday afternoon.

“Good morning.” Maddie passed her a coffee. “I’m sorry we forgot your chai yesterday. I hope this makes up for it.”

Zelda took a sip and gave an exaggerated groan of pleasure. “Just what I needed.” She picked up her ever-present notebook. “Okay, here’s what I was thinking for that special gift basket...”

They discussed business for another ten minutes. Maddie had scheduled the last of her appointments this morning and was anxious to get started.

“Oh, I can’t remember if I told you. Chase will be bringing Annie by about noon. We’re going out to the shelter to see if we can find a puppy.” She smiled for the first time since yesterday. “She thinks it’s for the son of a customer.”

“Aren’t you clever? Do you have any idea what kind of dog you want?”

Maddie lifted her shoulders. “Brent said a family dog. I guess we’ll just see what they have.” She wrapped her scarf around her neck. “If she shows up early, keep her occupied, will you?”

“Sure thing.” Zelda hauled out another gift basket and started to fill it. They were selling as quickly as she could put them together.

* * *

“What kind of a dog does the little boy want?” Annie looked expectantly at Maddie.

“I don’t think he even knows he’s getting one.” Maddie reached over and gave the child’s hand an affectionate squeeze. “But I was thinking of something that gets fairly large. Some of the people in Lily’s condo building have small dogs. They’re nice little things, but this boy lives out in the country and I think a larger dog would be more suitable.”

Annie sighed. “I’d love to have a dog, but I’d never ask for one.”

“Why not?”

The child squirmed a bit in her seat. “Cynthia,” she muttered.

Maddie should have known. “She doesn’t want you to have a dog?”

“No. She says they’re a nuisance.” She kept her face averted and Maddie hoped she wasn’t crying. Perhaps this hadn’t been such a good idea. “Know what I’d do if I had a dog?”

“What?” Maddie’s throat was closed up and she could scarcely get the word out.

“I’d take a picture and put it with my happy picture. Then I’d have two.”

Maddie tightened her grip on the steering wheel. If she wasn’t careful, she was going to come completely undone. She turned a corner and was relieved to spot the shelter. “Oh look, we’re here.”

Annie climbed out and ran over to the wire enclosure. Some of the larger dogs were in their outdoor pens, and they ran up to the wire, vying for attention.

Maddie stopped and watched. The child was at a perfect age for a dog, and she had no doubt that she would take good care of it. Not for the first time she wished that Brent was involved with someone other than Cynthia. Anyone at all...just not that cold-hearted woman. She pulled herself together and motioned Annie to follow her inside.

* * *

“So what do you think?” They had seen every dog in the shelter. Maddie had been careful not to influence Annie, who had studied each dog carefully before moving on to the next. Maddie realized she’d left the choice a little late, as many of the cages displayed an ‘Adopted’ sign already.

Annie shook her head. “I don’t know.” She looked up at Maddie, her eyes wary. “I want to help you choose just the right dog, but I don’t think it’s here.”

The volunteer looked down at the information sheet. “You wanted a family dog, right?”

Annie nodded.

“We had a dog come in this morning, but it won’t be available for another few days.”

“That’s okay.” Maddie and Annie spoke at the same time.

“Could we see him?” Annie slipped her hand into Maddie’s and pulled her down. “I have a good feeling. This is going to be the one.”

The volunteer led them to a separate area, away from the constant barking. “Here we are,” she

said, and opened the door.

A small white puppy looked at them with dark, hopeful eyes.

“Oh, Maddie.” Annie rushed over to the cage. “This one is perfect.”

Maddie smiled. The large paws were an indication that it would indeed grow into a much larger dog. “What is it?” she said to the volunteer.

“It’s a lab. They’re widely considered to be the perfect family dog.”

Annie poked her fingers through the wire, and the dog licked at them. “Can I hold it?” she asked.

The volunteer looked at Maddie, who nodded. “Okay.” She opened the latch and lifted the dog down onto the floor.

Annie immediately fell to her knees, and the puppy scrambled into her lap and licked her face.

“Oh,” she said, her arms around the squirming puppy. “You’re beautiful.” She looked up at Maddie. “This is the one.”

“I think so, too.” She turned to the volunteer. “Can we do the necessary paperwork now? And I’ve been instructed to make an additional donation of a thousand dollars over and above the costs involved.”

The volunteer nodded gratefully. “We can always use donations. Thank you.”

* * *

“Uncle Chase says that jealousy is a waste of energy, but I don’t care.” Annie looked straight ahead as they drove back. “I’m jealous of the little boy who gets that dog.” She turned, suddenly alarmed. “You think he’ll take care of him, don’t you?”

It was all Maddie could do not to smile. “Oh yes. I met his father, and he’s a very nice man. He’ll make sure the dog is well taken care of.”

Annie settled back down. “That’s okay, then.” She was silent for a few blocks, then spoke again. “Will you have to take care of him for a while?”

“Just two days. I hope Lily doesn’t mind. After all, it’s her condo.”

“She won’t mind.” Maddie wished she could share the girl’s confidence. “When?”

“I have to pick it up on the 23rd. That’s Thursday, I think.”

“That’s the night of the ball.”

“The Oilmen’s Ball?” Lily had told her about Chase’s invitation.

“Yes. I’m going with the family this year. Grandma and Granddad are coming from Vancouver Island. I get to wear a long dress and everything.”

“Lucky girl.” She tried not to think about Brent and Cynthia, but an image of them dancing together persisted. She forced herself to smile. “Take some pictures for your happy place, okay?”

Annie nodded, but she seemed aware that it was a touchy subject. “I will.” She fidgeted with her gloves, and Maddie gave her an encouraging smile. “What is it?”

The child had never looked more serious. “Will we still be friends? You know, after Christmas?”

Maddie thought carefully before answering. After everything this child had endured, she didn’t want to be a disappointment in her life. “Of course we will. You’ll still be skating, won’t you?”

“Yes.” The answer was less than enthusiastic. “But you won’t be in Uncle Chase’s building anymore, will you.” It was more of a statement than a question.

“That’s true. But Zelda and I have been talking about finding a new location. You’ll always know where to find me.”

“I guess.”

“By the way, did you hear the good news?”

Annie raised her head hopefully.

“Your Uncle Chase is taking Lily to the Oilmen’s Ball.”

The news didn’t seem to surprise the youngster. “I think he really likes her. He’s always asking about her.”

“Well, don’t tell anyone, but I think she likes him, too.” It was amazing the way Lily had changed her opinion about Chase. Maddie was happy for her friend, but couldn’t help being a little envious.

She drove down the ramp into the parking area and pulled into her spot. Only a few more hours to go today and she could relax. Zelda had organized two gift wrapping demonstrations for tomorrow as the downtown area would be crowded with shoppers on Saturday. Maddie had set aside the day to buy the last of the gifts, but intended to take Sunday off; it couldn’t come soon enough.

“Here we are. Thank you for helping out with the puppy.” She gathered her things. “Are you going skating this afternoon?”

“Probably.” Annie seemed reluctant to part company. “Are you coming over?”

“I’m sorry, I can’t.” She gave an exaggerated sigh. “This is the last big weekend before Christmas, and Zelda and I are swamped.” She reached for the child’s hand and they walked together toward the elevators. “You’ll be skating next week, right?”

Annie forced a smile. “Uh huh.”

“Great. I’ll come over and watch.” She stepped into the lobby and watched the doors close, taking the child up to her uncle’s office. At least Annie would soon have the puppy to love. That thought would have to be enough to get her through the next week.

* * *

“Do you always close your shop at this time of year?” Maddie handed Lily a cup of coffee when she appeared in the kitchen on Sunday morning. “It’s such a good idea.”

Even dressed in baggy sweats and an old grey hoodie, Lily managed to look beautiful. She took a sip of the coffee before answering. “I tried staying open when I first opened, but nobody has their mind on work, and it’s our slowest season, so I allow them a week off without pay if they want it, and I also give them a week with pay.” She flipped her hair back out of her face. “That’s in addition to their stats and their regular holidays.” She gave Maddie a sly smile. “Trust me, when the union people come around, none of my employees want to play.”

“I guess not.” Maddie leafed through the thick Sunday paper. “I suppose you want the business section?”

Lily nodded and held out her hand.

“Good, that leaves the important stuff for me.” Lily had often pointed out that there was little to be gained by reading either the entertainment or the society sections, but this morning Maddie didn’t care. She was relaxed for the first time in days and took the relevant sections over to the couch, where she tucked in her feet and began to read.

Maddie skimmed the entertainment section, and then moved on to the society pages. A series of

photographs on the front page of the section caught her eye, and she almost gasped aloud. She looked up at Lily, who was deep into an article.

She looked back at one specific picture, hoping that her eyes had been playing tricks on her, but no such luck. There it was...a picture of Chase and a woman. He was reaching for her arm as she stepped out of a limousine under the *porte cochere* of the hotel. Even in the grainy photograph she could see that the woman was smiling adoringly at him. A long, sweeping fur coat covered her dress but those must be diamonds sparkling at her ears; they were obvious even in the newspaper.

She looked up at her friend again. Lily shook the newspaper and frowned in concentration. What if she didn't tell her? No, that wouldn't work. Lily was bound to find out and would be even angrier that Maddie hadn't warned her.

In that moment, she hated Chase Drummond. Damn him and the casual way he'd treated her best friend. And damn his brother, too.

That's not fair, said the voice in her head. *Brent didn't tell you he was unattached.*

That may be true, but it didn't excuse Chase's blatant lies. He'd told Lily that he wasn't with that woman any more. What was her name? She read the photo caption. Oh yes, Laurel Carmichael. He'd said that there was nothing between them, and yet the photo caption said otherwise: *Laurel Carmichael and Brent Drummond attend the wedding of their close friends, Sarah Fremantle and Charles Montgomery. When asked if wedding bells were in the future for the attractive couple, Miss Carmichael answered, "Stay tuned."*

Maddie opened her mouth to speak but couldn't bring herself to burst Lily's bubble. At least not yet. It was bad enough that her own romantic dreams had been crushed, but Lily would be devastated by this news.

Unaware of Maddie's distress, Lily flicked the business section with a fingernail and uttered a disgusted sound. "Would you listen to this? Some guy is expounding on what's wrong with the oil exploration industry. As if he's going to..." She stopped abruptly when she saw the look on her friend's face. "What is it?" She slid down from the stool and walked across the room.

She took the newspaper from Maddie's outstretched hand, scanned the story and then shook her head in disbelief. In that short space of time, the spark that had lit her eyes for the past several days

flickered and went out. She glanced back down at the newspaper and blinked several times.

“He said he was going out of town.”

It wasn't the words that frightened Maddie. It was the cool, unemotional way they were delivered, as though the picture meant nothing. But Maddie knew better. Lily had taken a leap of faith when she'd agreed to go out with Chase Drummond, and he had let her down in the most hurtful way possible.

Lily looked down at the picture again, studying it as though to memorize it. Then she folded the paper, shoved it under the grate in the fireplace and lit it. Standing with her back to Maddie, she faced the fireplace while the newspaper flared and then burned to ashes.

Maddie knew better than to say anything. Lily walked into the kitchen, rinsed out her coffee cup and poured some fresh. Her brow furrowed as she tapped her fingernails restlessly against her cup.

“The thing is,” she said, shooting a quick glance at Maddie to make sure she was listening, “I don't know whether to be mad at him or at myself. I saw this coming the other night at the fundraiser, but I chose to believe him when he said they weren't together.” She raised her eyes toward the ceiling. “How ridiculous is that? When I saw them together I should have walked...” Her phone rang. She looked at it and grimaced. “My mother. Just what I needed.” She picked up the phone. “Hello, Mom.” She listened for a moment.

“When was this?” Her voice had become brisk and businesslike. She grabbed a notepad from the counter and started to make notes. “And you're with him now?” She held the phone away and checked the time. “Okay. It's ten thirty here now. I'll be there before dinner tonight. What do the doctors say?” She listened, nodding her head. “That's good, Mom. What you need to do now is keep it together until I get there.” She started to make a “hurry up” motion with her hand. “Okay, but while I'm talking to you I can't be booking a flight or packing a bag. Yes, I'll phone you from the airport and let you know when I'm getting in.”

She disconnected and stood for a moment, staring out the window. “My dad's had a heart attack.” She walked toward the bedroom.

Maddie jumped up and followed. “How is he?”

“He’s still alive but the doctors say they won’t know anything for sure until tomorrow.”

Maddie felt helpless. “What can I do? Anything?”

“You could go online and see what flights there are. I think Air Canada and WestJet would be the best bets.”

Maddie had just finished her search when Lily came out with a small suitcase.

“There are several flights between now and three o’clock. Do you want me to book one, or will you check at the airport?”

Lily gave it only a moment’s thought. “I’ll wait until I get there. I might have a better chance of getting on.”

“That’s what I think, too. I’ve already called a cab. It should be downstairs.” Maddie walked her friend to the door. “What about work? Anything I should know?”

Lily shook her head. “No. Greta will probably come in and finish up the big t-shirt order, but other than that, the place is closed.” She gave Maddie a quick hug. “Okay, I’m outta here.”

Maddie called after her as she ran down the hall and stabbed at the elevator button. “What do I do if Chase calls?”

Lily hesitated for a split second, then continued walking. “Tell him to go to Hell.” The elevator doors opened, and she was gone.

Chapter Sixteen

Lily opened her eyes and for a moment she didn't know where she was. She looked at the ceiling and saw the stars. Faded now, they had glowed when she was a child. Many of her dreams had been launched looking at those stars.

Her mother's voice came floating down the hall and memories of what happened yesterday washed over her. She'd rushed directly to the hospital and on seeing her, her mother had burst into tears. A strong woman, she'd been holding herself together until Lily arrived, but the sight of her only child weakened her defenses.

"It's okay, Mom." Lily held her mother in an embrace. "Cry if you like. You've been under a lot of stress."

The back of her father's hand was bruised where they'd tried to set up an intravenous feed. A heart monitor stood beside his bed and she'd watched it for what seemed like a long time, looking for any change.

The most striking thing about the man lying still in the bed was that his hair hadn't been combed. Her father was meticulous about his appearance and for some odd reason she'd found herself focusing on the fact that he wouldn't be pleased if he saw himself in a mirror.

She swung her feet out of bed, pulled on some clothes and padded down the hallway toward the kitchen. Her mother was just hanging up the phone. She stood for a moment, hand on the receiver, and stared out the window into the back yard. Her mother was a beautiful woman but Lily had suspected for some time that she was also the brains behind her parents' successful business. Her father was respected and most of his male colleagues preferred to do business with him, but he often deferred to her mother when it came to important decisions.

"Good morning, Mom." She interrupted her mother's reverie. "Any word?"

Her mother turned. It was difficult to tell if she'd had any sleep. "They say he's resting comfortably. He woke up once earlier this morning then went back to sleep."

"Is that good?"

"Apparently, yes." Her mother forced a smile. "It looks like we won't be taking that trip."

Her parents often went to Taiwan on business, but this was the first time they'd planned a pleasure trip. The slow-down between Christmas and New Year presented the perfect opportunity to get away, and she knew her father had been looking forward to it.

"You'll go some other time."

Her mother waved a hand dismissively. "It's not important. I don't even know why I mentioned it." She studied her daughter for the first time since she'd arrived. "You need to eat something. You're too thin and you have dark circles under your eyes."

Lily grinned. Things were going to be okay if her mother was commenting on her appearance. She gave her a quick hug. "I'll grab something at the hospital." She glanced at the clock on the stove. "Come on, let's get going. The doctor said he'd talk to us again around ten."

* * *

"Hi, Boss. How was your weekend?" Zelda arrived laden down with bags from the deli. She'd stocked up on baskets when the craft store went out of business. Once again, Maddie was thankful for her assistant's foresight as it looked as though they could sell every gift basket they could make before the week was out.

"It was crazy. Did you happen to see the newspaper on Sunday?"

Zelda nodded. "I know. What's up with that, anyway? I thought you said Chase had invited Lily to the ball." She hung up her coat and started to work right away. "I've gotta say, that surprised me. He seems like such a nice guy." She glanced up quickly. "I'll bet his brother is a nice guy, too."

Maddie nodded. What her assistant said was true. That's why their behaviour didn't make sense.

"That's not all. Early Sunday morning, Lily's father had a heart attack. She flew to Vancouver right away. I'm going to call her in a couple of hours to get the latest."

"The latest what?"

Maddie recognized Chase's voice and stopped in the act of putting away supplies. She turned slowly and faced him. He was as unbelievably handsome as ever, but she had an almost uncontrollable urge to grab him by his starched white shirtfront and shake some sense into him.

"The latest news on Lily's father," she said coolly. "He had a heart attack yesterday."

“Oh no.” He took a few steps closer. “Is he going to be all right?”

Maddie shrugged. Why was she even talking to him? He had no right to Lily’s personal information. Anger surged inside her and she gripped the counter so tightly her knuckles turned white. “I’m not sure if she’d want me to discuss this with you.”

His eyes darkened, and a muscle in his jaw twitched. “I beg your pardon?”

Maddie’s patience snapped. “Come on, Chase. She saw the picture in the paper on Sunday. How could you do that to her?”

He turned his head as though he hadn’t heard her properly. “*What* are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the picture of you and your fiancée in Sunday’s paper.” Her anger suddenly drained away, and she lowered her voice. “You broke her heart, Chase. What I don’t understand is why you had to do it in such a public way.”

Understanding dawned on his face as she spoke. He turned abruptly and strode to the elevator without a word.

“That was interesting.” Zelda continued to assemble gift baskets. She’d learned to do several at once. “He looked more angry than anything.”

“Did he? I didn’t notice.” Maddie sat down on a stool. “I don’t usually lose my temper like that.” She looked around the small shop, lost with nothing to do. “I think I’ll go and get us some coffee.”

She returned a few minutes later, pushed through the revolving door and stopped beside David’s desk. “Uh-oh,” she said, seeing Chase back at her shop.

David gave her a curious look. “I think he’s waiting for you.”

Maddie braced herself. “Then I guess I’d better see what he wants.”

She spotted the newspaper on the counter. The society section had been folded so the photographs were front and center. He jabbed the photo with his forefinger. “Lily saw this?” He brushed his own question away with a wave of his hand. “Of course she saw it, why am I even asking?” He leaned on the counter, the intensity in his gaze unsettling. “Laurel is not my fiancée, no matter what it says here.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “I’ve just been on the phone with her. She talked them into writing that photo caption.”

“Yeah, right.” Maddie gave him a skeptical look.

He picked up the paper and slapped it down again on the counter. “Her father owns the paper, dammit. She’s a spoiled brat who’s always managed to get what she wants.”

“Including you, it seems.”

“No.” He looked down at the picture, and his eyes hardened. “Not this time.”

Maddie was beginning to feel sorry for him, but wasn’t ready to let him off the hook. Not yet.

“So why did you tell Lily you were going away for the weekend? Why did you have to lie to her?”

He took a few steps away, then came back. “If I’d told her about the wedding, do you think she’d have agreed to go to the ball with me?” He stood silently, waiting for her answer.

Maddie had to admit that he had a point. “No.”

He spread his hands. “Exactly.” He started pacing again, then pulled out his cell phone. “I need her number, Maddie. I need to call her and explain this whole mess.”

She recalled her roommate’s parting comment and shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

His voice softened. “Please, Maddie.”

She shook her head. “I tell you what. When I speak with her later, I’ll ask her if it’s okay. That’s the best I can do.”

He seemed to accept her decision and shrugged. “Okay, I’ll be back.”

She watched him walk away, but she had the distinct feeling that Chase Drummond wasn’t going to give up that easily.

* * *

Chase stopped by the reception desk as soon as he stepped off the elevator. “Cancel my appointments for this morning, Marilyn.”

The receptionist didn’t miss a beat. This was the second time the boss had come storming into the office today. Something was up. Thankfully his personal secretary had filled her in on the details of his appointments before she’d left for holidays. She pulled up his schedule on her P.C. and began to dial.

The Rockies were visible in the distance from Chase’s office window. He stood there now,

fighting for composure. Brent had warned him several times that Laurel would cause him problems, and it looked as though his brother's prophesy was coming true. He could use Brent's advice right now, but he'd called home last night, sounding frustrated that he might be delayed a few more days. He thought for a few more minutes, then reached for the phone.

"Hello?" That was an odd way to answer a business phone. Chase quickly checked the number, but he had dialed correctly. "Is this Lily Hsu's studio?"

"Yes, but it's closed." The woman had a faint accent.

Chase was tempted to ask why this woman was answering the phone if the business was closed.

"Lily's had a family emergency. Her father has had a heart attack, and she went to Vancouver yesterday. The thing is, I need to contact her and I've lost her cell phone number."

Silence greeted his announcement. "Hello?" he said. "Are you there?"

"Is her father all right?"

"As far as I know, but that's why I need to call her. I want to check on him."

"I can't give out that information. I'm sorry." The person on the other end of the line hung up and he stared at his phone in disbelief. People simply didn't hang up on Chase Drummond. There was only one thing to do. He grabbed his coat and left his office.

A blue compact car sat alone in the parking lot.

Chase tried the front door, but it was locked, as he had expected. There was no bell, so he knocked. No response. He knocked again and called out, "It's Chase Drummond. Could I come in?"

The light came on in the front office, and a woman peered at him through the side window before deciding to open the door.

"Yes?" She stood in the open doorway.

He gave her his most winning smile. "I'm a friend of Lily's. I think I spoke to you on the phone a little while ago. May I come in?"

She moved back and he stepped into the reception area. "I'm very anxious to get in touch with her, as I mentioned on the phone. Would you please reconsider and give me her cell phone number?"

The woman's expression softened. "You helped my Bernie."

"I'm sorry?" What was she talking about?

"Your organization. We wouldn't have been able to enroll our son in a hockey league if it wasn't for you."

No matter how badly he wanted Lily's number, he couldn't take full credit. "What's your name?"

"Greta."

"Well, Greta, it's very kind of you to say that, but I'm only one person. It takes a lot of people to make the organization work."

Greta studied him for a moment then walked to the reception desk. She opened a drawer, pulled out an old-fashioned Rolodex and flipped through it. "Here," she said, pushing two cards across the desk. "Lily's cell phone number and her parents' number." She waited patiently while he entered them in his cell phone.

"Thank you," he said, passing back the cards. "I really appreciate this."

"Lily's a good boss." There was that accent again. "She's been good to me. When we came to this country, I could barely speak English. She was the only one who would give me work."

He smiled at her. "I'd say she's a good judge of character. Thanks again."

He left the building and walked slowly toward his car. This was a side of Lily he didn't know. He only hoped he hadn't ruined his chances to learn more about the woman who had captured his heart.

* * *

Lily grabbed her phone. "Hello?" She'd fallen asleep in a chair in her father's room.

"Lily, please don't hang up."

Tears sprang to her eyes as she recognized his voice. Dammit! Why did he affect her like this? She looked up to see her mother watching her. She sat up and tossed back her hair. "What do you want, Chase?" She hated herself for her weakness; she should hang up but his voice sounded so good.

"I want to explain about Saturday. Lily, please believe me. I am not engaged to Laurel. I don't

know how she managed it, but she bribed a photographer to be there and then she got her father's newspaper to run that ridiculous photo caption."

"Fool me once, Chase."

"I know." She could almost see the expression on his face as he searched for the right words.

"I'd promised to accompany her to that wedding a couple of months ago. Long before I met you."

"You lied to me about being out of town."

"Would you have agreed to go to the ball with me if I'd told you about the wedding?"

She sighed. "No, probably not."

"It was wrong, Lily. I admit that, but I wanted you to go to the ball with me. I still want you to go, if you'll forgive me."

Her mother jumped up and ran to her father's side. His eyes were wide open, and he was looking around, trying to get his bearings.

"I have to go. My father just woke up."

"Wait... Can I call you later?"

"I don't think so. It's better this way, Chase. Goodbye." She disconnected and went to join her mother and father.

* * *

Lily's mother started talking as soon as they climbed into the back seat of the taxi. "Did you believe him?" She looked hopeful.

"Who, the doctor? Yes, I did."

It had been two days since her father's stroke, and the doctor was remarkably upbeat. True to form, Lily's father had fought against staying in the hospital, but had been overruled by his wife and the doctor. Lily had looked on, an amused smile on her face as her mother had transformed into the tough negotiator she knew her to be. "Two more days," she'd insisted, echoing the doctor.

"Then you can come home."

Her father had looked to her for help, but she'd shrugged, deferring to her mother. In her opinion, he was ready to go home now, but better safe than sorry.

“But our trip.” He’d tried one last time to get up.

“Taiwan will still be there next year.” Her mother’s tone brooked no argument, and her father finally lay back, having exhausted all of his arguments.

Her mother spoke again. “The doctor says it was a very small incident.”

Lily nodded. They’d been over this several times already, but she knew her mother would keep repeating it until she actually believed it. She was content to be a sounding board.

The taxi pulled into the driveway, and both women got out. Lily paid the driver and stood, looking at the family home. Located part way up Burnaby Mountain, it was the only home she’d ever known.

Lily walked up the broad front steps and on to the verandah that ran across the front of the house. Beside the door, propped in a cardboard box, was a bouquet of white calla lilies. Packed tightly, and without any greenery to distract the eye, they were held together by a wide white ribbon.

Lily gasped when she saw them, and her hand flew to her mouth to hide her reaction, but she doubted that she had fooled her mother. She lifted the flowers from the container and brought them to her nose. She knew they weren’t scented, but maybe she could hide behind them.

Her mother gave her a knowing look. “Where’s the card?” She looked into the box and then around the porch. “How do you know they’re for you?”

Lily almost dropped the bouquet. “Oh. I...ah...”

“Never mind.” Her mother’s eyes were alight with mischief. “I know they’re for you.” She dug into her purse for the house key and opened the door. “I suppose they’re from him?”

Lily nodded.

“I see.” Her mother hung up both of their coats. “At least he has good taste.”

Lily rubbed one of the flowers between her thumb and forefinger. The texture was thick and waxy. “Most of the time,” she murmured.

Her mother raised both eyebrows. “Let’s get some tea.”

Lily followed into the kitchen, found a simple black vase and filled it with water. The flowers looked right at home on the kitchen table.

“We had a misunderstanding last weekend.”

Her mother sat down and waited.

“He said he was through with this woman, but over the weekend they were photographed at a wedding, and the picture appeared in the newspaper. The photo caption hinted that they might be getting engaged.”

“But he’s not.”

Lily’s head snapped around. “How do you know that?”

Her mother gestured toward the flowers.

Lily nodded. “He says he’s not with her and never has been.” She watched her mother for a reaction, but got none. “Her father owns the newspaper, and Chase says she hired the photographer and then strong-armed the society columnist to print an erroneous photo caption.”

Her mother nodded as though she’d heard the story before. “What else?”

“He told me he was leaving town for the weekend. His excuse for lying was that I wouldn’t have agreed to go with him to the Oilmen’s ball if I’d known about the wedding.”

“Was he right?”

Lily was beginning to feel like she was the one who’d done something wrong. “Yes.”

“So now you’ve decided to punish him by refusing to talk to him.” She held up a hand. “I know it was him on the phone earlier today, so don’t deny it.”

As if she could fool her mother.

“Why, Lily? Why won’t you forgive him?”

“Because.” She looked down at the table as she spoke. “I’m afraid.”

Her mother watched her for several long moments then stood and went to the stove. The kettle was boiling for tea, and she took her time, pre-heating the pot and then spooning in some of the fragrant green tea leaves she imported from China. When she finally sat, Lily raised her eyes.

“I love your father, Lily. I love him very much.”

It was difficult not to show emotion, but Lily managed. Where was this going? She nodded. “I know, Mom.”

“Good.” She poured tea into the cups and passed one to her daughter. “Because I’m going to tell

you something.” Her gaze drifted around the kitchen then came to rest on her teacup.

Chapter Seventeen

“When I was about eighteen, back in Thailand, I fell in love.”

Lily’s heart began to thud.

“He was a Frenchman.” Her eyes grew wistful. “He was very handsome. He worked as a desk clerk at the biggest hotel in town, and we saw each other every day for three or four months.” She took a sip of tea, and Lily could see that her hands were trembling.

“We wanted to get married, but when I told my parents, they balked. They wanted me to marry someone local, or failing that, someone who would understand our ways.” She gave a wry smile.

“Someone Asian.” She gave a deep sigh, and in that sound, Lily heard the regrets of a lifetime.

“There was nothing dramatic. They didn’t threaten to disown me, or lock me up. They knew that I would be a good, dutiful daughter and follow their wishes.” She looked at Lily, her eyes brimming with tears. “I was introduced to your father, and I married him.” She gave a thin smile. “In time, I’ve come to love him. He’s a good man.”

Lily stared across the table at this woman she didn’t know. “Why are you telling me this? Why now?”

“Because you’ve never been in love before.” She reached out and touched one of the flowers. “I can see it on your face, Lily. You love this man. Don’t let pride stand in your way. If you don’t at least give him a chance, you’ll regret it for the rest of your life.”

Lily stood up, walked to the window and stared out. The block of ice that had surrounded her heart began to thaw. It had taken a lot for her mother to speak so candidly. They were not a demonstrative family, and confidences did not come freely. She turned back toward her mother and placed her hands on her shoulders. “Thank you, Mom.” It was a simple acknowledgement of the effort it had taken for her mother to open up. She leaned over and wrapped her arms around her mother’s neck, giving her a quick, fierce hug. “I love you.”

Her mother patted her arm. “I know, Lily. I know.”

* * *

“Good news.” Maddie came back to the shop shortly before noon after a round of deliveries.

They'd scarcely had time to talk this morning. "Lily's father is going to make a full recovery."

"That's great." Zelda tweaked a bow on a gift and stood back to admire it.

"Yeah. I spoke to her last night. He's already agitating to go home. She'll probably come home tomorrow."

Zelda nodded. "Before I forget to tell you, Annie came by earlier. She said to tell you she's gone to the rink." She looked at her watch. "She's probably still there if you want to take your coffee over."

Maddie could use a break. "Are you sure you don't mind?"

"Go. Brendan's on his way. He's bringing me a sandwich."

It was snowing lightly when Maddie got to the rink, but that didn't seem to bother the children. Even a few adults were out skating today...probably taking time off with their children over the holidays. Pale sunshine cast a faint glow on the ice.

She tried not to think of Brent as she sat down on the cold cement step, but it was difficult. She pushed those memories to the back of her mind and concentrated on finding Annie in the crowd of children.

"Maddie!" Annie waved as she skated by. She was with the same girls as last time, and Maddie was delighted to see that the child seemed to be part of the group. She waved back.

A shadow fell over her; someone stood behind her, blocking out the sun. *Please, let it be Brent.* She turned and her heart plummeted.

"Hello, Maddie." Allan stood there, shivering in a light coat and a regular pair of shoes.

She stood up. "Allan, what are you doing here?" She fought to remain calm. "How did you find me?"

He pulled back, seemingly surprised at her lack of warmth. "Your assistant told me where to look. Aren't you glad to see me?"

She looked behind him. "Where's Connor? Is he with you?" She hoped that he hadn't brought the boy. The child had become attached to her, and she didn't want to confuse him now.

"No. Just me." He spread his arms.

“What are you doing here?” she repeated. How could she make him understand? She took a step closer. “I thought I made it clear when you phoned last time.”

“Come on, Maddie. You can’t mean that.” He reached for her and pulled her into an embrace. She stilled, letting him hold her in his arms. Perhaps when he realized she wasn’t responding, he’d finally get the message.

“I’ve missed you, Maddie.”

She pulled back and looked at him. In that moment, she saw him for what he was. Self-centered and vain. She was lucky that she’d escaped from their relationship before it was too late.

“Allan.” She spoke clearly and distinctly. “Listen to me, because I don’t want to have to say this again. It’s over between us. I have no feelings left for you. None.” She looked into his eyes. “Do you understand?”

He backed away, bewildered. “But Maddie...”

“No, Allan. This is verging on harassment.”

He took another step back. “You really mean it, don’t you?”

She groaned aloud. “Yes.”

His expression hardened. “You’re a real bitch, you know that?”

“Thank you for the compliment. Now go away and leave me alone.” She didn’t watch him leave, but sat back down on the cement, her body trembling with rage.

Annie skated up, blade guards in hand. The child slipped the guards on her skates, walked up the shallow steps and sat down.

Maddie finally noticed her and put an arm around the child’s shoulders. “Hi there, sweetie.” Tears brimmed in her eyes, and she brushed them away.

Annie looked up at her. “Who was that man? Did he hurt you?”

Maddie pulled her closer. “A long time ago, Annie. He was my boyfriend a long time ago.” She sighed. “He lives in Vancouver, and I don’t know why he came here. I already told him I don’t want to see him anymore.”

“What’s the matter with him?”

Maddie laughed. “Good question. Anyway, I don’t think he’ll be bothering me anymore.”

Brent pulled over to the side of the road as he neared Calgary. It had been dark when he got started early this morning, but he was determined to get back and sort things out with Cynthia. He pulled out his cell phone, scrolled through his contacts and pushed a number.

“Hello?” She sounded abrupt, and he wondered if she spoke to everyone in that tone. “Hello, Cynthia.”

“Brent, darling.” The saccharine tone made him want to gag. “Are you back in town?”

“Almost. I’m on Deerfoot near Tuxedo Park, and I’m starving. Do you know any restaurants around here?” It was a set-up, and he felt a bit guilty, but he knew she’d volunteer to meet him. It was the best way he could think to get her in a public place.

“What are you looking for?”

“Just a hamburger and a coffee, but I’d like somewhere comfortable.”

“Then I know the perfect spot.” She proceeded to give him the name and directions. “I’ll meet you, and we can have coffee.”

She arrived before his hamburger had been delivered. As usual, she didn’t want to eat and ordered a cup of coffee.

“I’ve missed you,” she said, looking at him expectantly.

The server brought her coffee and his hamburger. He bit into it hungrily. “I’m getting tired of these long stints away from home. I miss everybody when I’m away.” His thoughts turned to Maddie, and he forced himself to focus on the task at hand. “How’s Annie?”

She frowned. “Really, Brent. You should do something about that child. She’s getting to be quite a handful.”

“In what way?” He tilted his head but she didn’t seem to notice the challenge in his eyes.

She placed her cup carefully in the saucer and raised her eyes. “Well, she hangs around with that Maddie all the time. I don’t know what the attraction is there.” She dabbed at her lips with a napkin. “Darling, when we’re married do you think we could live alone? Chase could take care of her, couldn’t he?”

“What’s the matter with us?”

She pouted her lips. “I just don’t think it’s fair to ask me to raise someone else’s child.”

“You know, you’re right.” Brent nodded his agreement. “It’s not fair at all.”

“Darling! You understand.”

“Yes.” He leaned across the table and lowered his voice. “I understand that you’re a mean spirited, selfish woman.” He was so angry he was trembling. “You don’t have an ounce of compassion for anyone besides yourself, do you?”

It took a moment for his words to sink in. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that it’s over between us, Cynthia. I hoped maybe you’d grow to love Annie the way I do, but I see that isn’t going to happen.”

Her eyes narrowed into slits. “You’re dumping me? Is that what this is?”

He saw her clearly for the first time. “There was never anything real between us, Cynthia. I can see that now.”

She slid out of the booth and stood over him, shaking with rage. “I never should have wasted my time on you. I went for the wrong brother. At least Chase appreciates a good woman.”

He was tempted to laugh, but her outburst saddened him. “You’re right about that,” he said to her retreating back. “He appreciates a good woman all right.”

Brent watched her car pull out, and then went back to eating his hamburger. He was sorry he had to do it that way, but there was no time to waste. He pulled out his phone and called Chase.

“Hi, I’m on my way back in. What’s up?”

“Nothing much. Mom and Dad got here yesterday. Oh, and I got that data you sent; the site looks promising.” His brother sounded tired. “Annie is over at the skating rink, if you’re in the area.”

“I’m not far away. I’ll stop before I come back to the office.”

Brent pulled his SUV into a parking spot and leaned back, exhausted. Light snow was falling, and it took him a minute to find Annie. She was skating with her friends, and he watched for a while, a smile on his face. At least with Maddie he knew how she felt about the child. He glanced over toward where they’d sat together. Was that her? He turned on the windshield wipers to get a better look. Yes, she was sitting on the step, and if he wasn’t mistaken, she wasn’t sitting on

anything. He reached into the back seat for the old blanket he'd used last time.

He had one hand on the door handle when he saw him. A man walked up and stood behind Maddie. She looked up at him and jumped up. They exchanged a few words, and he watched in disbelief as the man put his arms around her. Something twisted inside his chest. He dropped the blanket, turned on the ignition and drove away before he could see any more.

Parked in the basement of the building that bore his name, Brent slumped back against the headrest. What had just happened? He closed his eyes, but all he could see was Maddie in the arms of a man.

There were many times since their last conversation that he'd wanted to phone her again, but something had held him back. When he saw her again, he'd wanted to be free of Cynthia. He gave a short, mirthless laugh. At least something good had come out of his interest in Maddie.

He scrubbed a hand over his face and felt the beginnings of a beard. He'd been so anxious to get home that he hadn't shaved this morning. His mother wouldn't approve. Maybe that's what he needed right now, a little motherly advice. He sure wasn't doing that well on his own.

Brent took the elevator up to the office, smiled at Marilyn and walked into his brother's office. He was tempted to put his feet up on Chase's desk but didn't have the energy for the lively argument that would ensue. He was disappointed, exhausted and wanted only a warm shower and some of Hannah's home cooking.

"You were right." Chase spoke as though they'd been in the middle of a conversation. "I should have done something about Laurel a long time ago."

Brent took a second look at his brother. It was rare for Chase to admit to being wrong. Dark smudges under his eyes spoke of a lack of sleep.

"What has she done now?"

Chase explained the weekend wedding fiasco. "And now Lily doesn't want anything to do with me, not that I can blame her." He raised tortured eyes.

"Well it looks like I've struck out in the romance department as well. I saw Maddie over at the rink with a man."

Chase re-arranged a few files on his desk. "That doesn't necessarily mean anything."

"Trust me, they were together." Brent stood. "Are you still going to the ball tomorrow?"

"I have to. I'm president of the association this year, remember? What about you?"

"I don't know." Brent toyed with a model of an oil derrick that sat on the edge of the desk. "I sure don't feel like it."

"No pressure, Bro, but I think Annie was counting on us being there. She has a new dress, and I haven't heard about anything else all week."

Brent smiled. "She's a determined little thing. Okay, I'll think about it."

"By the way." Chase looked down at a piece of paper. "Did you authorize Maddie to buy a puppy for Annie? Plus a thousand dollar donation?"

Brent brightened and leaned over the desk. "Yes. Did she find something?"

"It appears so. She's arranged for it to be delivered to the ranch on Christmas Eve."

"The day after tomorrow." Brent spoke to himself as he walked out. "Perfect."

* * *

"He's going to be a handful." Lily walked downstairs with her mother. Her father had been brought into the house in a wheelchair, complaining all the way. In spite of his protests, he was tired and had fallen asleep almost instantly.

"Don't worry, I'm used to him after all these years." Her mother led her into the kitchen. They'd consumed many cups of tea since her arrival, and were about to have another. "I'd rather have him like this, eager to go back to work than the alternative."

"Yes, I suppose so." Lily filled the kettle and set it on the burner. "He was lucky."

"Yes, he was lucky." Her mother nodded her agreement. "And now it's time for you to get back to your own life."

Lily looked out the window. Large flakes had started to fall. The temperature hovered around freezing, and they were melting as they hit the grass in the back yard, but a cold snap was predicted. Suddenly she ached for the cold, crisp prairie air. "You're right," she said, turning to her mother with a smile. "It's time I went back."

* * *

“Two days until Christmas.” Zelda was her usual cheerful self. “I can’t believe how many orders we’ve processed in a short time.” She sipped on her latte, her gaze thoughtful. “Have you considered what you’re going to do in the New Year?”

“Not really.” Maddie looked up from her ever-present list. “But if we decide to continue this business, I think it should be as partners.” The elevator opened and she glanced toward it, but Brent wasn’t there. She thought she’d recognized his vehicle in the basement yesterday, but she wasn’t sure. She wanted to see him once more, to look into his eyes and see if she’d imagined their previous attraction for each other. It still hurt every time she replayed Cynthia’s words, but a glimmer of hope still burned somewhere deep inside. It didn’t make sense, but it was there, nonetheless.

“Well I’m in, but maybe we should wait until we make any decisions.”

Maddie frowned, trying to recall what they’d been talking about. Oh yes, the business. “Good call. We’ll get together early in January.” She looked around the shop. Only a few gifts remained, and they were to be picked up shortly. She looked outside; it was already getting dark. “You can handle everything if I leave now, can’t you? I have to go to the shelter and pick up the puppy.”

Zelda raised an eyebrow. “Good luck with that.”

“No kidding.” She touched one of the Christmas lights, still amazed that someone had invented lights that were cool to the touch. “One more day. We’ll take this down tomorrow, right?”

Zelda nodded. “See you then.”

* * *

“Hi, Dad!” Brent gave his father a manly hug. “Good to see you.”

His mother came into the kitchen, and he leaned over to hug her as well. “Mom, you look more beautiful than ever.” He held her away. “You really do.”

She laid a hand on his bristly face. “If you’re trying to distract me from the fact that you need a shave, it’s not working.” She gave him a quick kiss. “Hello, Son.”

Annie launched herself into his arms. “Uncle Brent!”

“Hello, Munchkin.” He held her in his arms a bit longer than normal. “I’ve missed you.”

“Me too.” She tugged at his hand. “Come and see my dress. I’m going to wear it tonight.”

“Not now, sweetie. I need to have a shower and shave.”

She tried to hide her disappointment.

“I want to see you all dressed up. We’ll take some happy pictures, okay?”

She nodded solemnly. “I’ve got my camera all charged up. I promised Maddie, too.”

Pain sliced into his chest, but he managed to smile. “That’s great.” He glanced at his parents,

then left the room.

Chapter Eighteen

“Listen, you. Stop that.” The puppy had managed to wrap the leash around Maddie’s legs for the umpteenth time. She was trying to be firm but it was difficult with the squirming bundle of energy. “Lily’s probably home by now so you’d better be on your best behaviour.”

Right. And pigs were going to fly. Any day now.

Maddie let herself into the condo. Lily’s purse sat on the counter next to a glass of wine. She could hear the shower, and Lily singing some unrecognizable tune.

She spread out the newspapers she’d brought home, covering a portion of the floor in her bedroom. She set the dog on it; he looked up at her, wagged his tail as if he understood, then commenced sniffing everything in the room. She noticed him heading toward her shoes and she quickly closed the closet door.

“I’ll just leave you in here for a few minutes while I talk to Lily, okay?” He tilted his head as though listening and then carried on with his sniffing expedition.

“Who were you talking to?” Lily padded down the hall in a bathrobe that doubled her size, which wasn’t difficult. There was a light in her eyes that hadn’t been there when they’d parted.

“It’s Annie’s puppy,” she blurted. “It’s just for overnight.”

“Okay. Just don’t let him near the carpet.” The condo floors were hardwood, but a spectacular area rug graced the center of the living area. Maddie knew her roommate had paid a fortune for it.

“Promise,” she said. “How’s your dad?”

“Feisty as ever. He wants to go back to work.” Lily picked up her wine glass, then set it back down. “I’m going to the ball tonight.” She turned to look at Maddie. “My mother said a few things to me that made me rethink my position.”

Maddie’s mouth fell open, but she closed it quickly. “I guess Chase is delighted about that.”

“He doesn’t know.” She picked up the glass, and this time she took a sip. “I’m going to just show up. If he’s with someone else already, then I’ll have made a mistake.” She ran a finger around the rim of the glass. “But at least I’ll have tried.”

Maddie had never seen Lily like this. She’d spoken with a vulnerability that was touching. She

recalled the way energy had sparked between the two of them on their very first meeting. “I have a feeling that this is going to work out just fine,” she said with a smile. “I just wish I could be there to see it.”

* * *

Chase circulated among the crowd. A server offered him a drink, but he declined with a polite shake of the head. He had nothing to celebrate. Besides, he’d never been intoxicated in front of his mother and father, and he wasn’t about to start now. He shoved a hand into his jacket pocket and frowned. What was that? He pulled his hand out, revealing the black beads that had fallen from Lily’s dress the night of the fashion show.

Regret curled around him like a boa constrictor, threatening to cut off his air. How had he been so foolish as to let her get away? He rolled the beads in his hand, admiring the way they reflected shards of light, then closed his fingers tightly around them, surprised that they were so sharp. Sharp, brilliant and unfathomable. Some of the qualities he admired in Lily.

It’s your own fault. He was beginning to hate that voice in his head. It reminded him constantly of what he had lost. It was time to pull himself together and be a proper host, if only to his own family.

He looked for his father. He was across the room, schmoozing with some old friends. He turned to his mother and asked her to dance.

She set down her glass, and he noticed that she’d barely touched it. “Thank you, Chase. I was getting tired of just standing there.”

He was beginning to relax when his mother gave him a piercing look. “Who is she, Chase?”

“Who is who?”

She gave him that serene, all-knowing look he’d learned to dread over the years.

“Chase Drummond, I’ve been home for thirty-six hours, and I haven’t seen you smile once. Not really smile. There’s something bothering you, and I’m willing to bet it’s a woman.”

There was no use fighting; she’d get it out of him in the end.

“I met a beautiful woman last month.” His voice softened when he talked about her. “She owns a

local business and is quite successful. She's fiercely independent, and she's probably the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

His mother smiled knowingly. "So what happened?"

"I blew it." He shrugged. "I let Laurel Carmichael manipulate me." He hesitated. "And I told Lily a bit of a lie, and now she doesn't want to have anything to do with me."

His mother shook her head. "There's no such thing as a bit of a lie. Why can't you just admit it? You told her a lie."

"Yes, I did. And you know what? I think it was the lie that ruined everything between us. She might have forgiven Laurel's nonsense after a while, but not the lie."

"Don't be too sure about that." His mother had an odd look in her eye.

"Why do you say that?"

"Look over there." She stopped dancing and turned him toward the entrance. "Is that her?"

Chase's heart stopped when he saw her. She stood alone between the Christmas trees that flanked the ballroom entrance, clutching her invitation. A form-fitting, brilliant green cheongsam clung to her figure. He was vaguely aware that every male in the ballroom had turned to look at her. Her dark eyes swept the crowd slowly, and then her gaze came to rest on him. A small smile played around the corners of her mouth when she spotted him, and the pain that had taken up residence in his chest moved on like it had never existed.

"Lily," he mouthed across the expanse of the ballroom. He turned back to his mother. "Excuse me, Mom, but that's Lily." He didn't wait for a reply, but closed the distance in a few long strides.

She looked up at him. "Hello, Chase." She waved the invitation. "Am I too late?"

He had no idea what had caused her to change her mind. He'd figure that out later. Right now, all he wanted to do was hold her. "Never," he whispered, gathering her into his arms.

The orchestra started up again and they swayed together, paying no attention to the music. "I'm sorry, Lily. Sorry about everything."

She placed a finger against his lips. "That's over, Chase. Life is too short for regrets."

Her words were the only music he needed. "I love you, Lily. I know it sounds crazy because we haven't spent that much time together, but I know you." He tilted up her chin so he could look into

her eyes. "And I love everything I know."

"Chase?"

"Hmmm?" She moved against him, and he groaned with need.

"Would you do something for me?"

"Anything."

"Good. Would you kiss me, please?"

He didn't care who was watching. With a whoop of joy, he lifted her off her feet and kissed her, aware of the way her body fitted against his in all the right places. When he finally put her down, the entire ballroom erupted in applause.

"Come on," he said, taking her by the hand. "I want you to meet my mother."

* * *

"Uncle Brent, you missed the excitement." Annie pointed to the dance floor. Chase and Lily were dancing again, oblivious to everyone else in the ballroom.

Her hand crept into his. "It was so romantic. Why are you late?"

"I got a flat tire on the way here. Can you believe it?" He moved to face her and bowed. "May I have the pleasure of this dance?"

She giggled. "Of course, silly."

Brent forced himself to take small steps as they made their way around the dance floor. "Are you having a good time?" he asked. "Where are the other kids?"

"They're in the other room. I'll go back there in a little while. I came in here so I could see all the gowns." She pulled back and looked up at him. "Uncle Brent?"

"Hmmm?"

"Why aren't you here with Cynthia?"

The question startled him, and he stopped abruptly. Had it only been this afternoon when he'd met Cynthia in the restaurant?

"I'm not going to be going out with her anymore." He looked down at her and smiled.

She looked puzzled. "But Uncle Brent, she told us that she was your fiancée."

The words registered slowly. He stopped completely, then pulled her off the dance floor.

“That’s not true. When did she say that?”

“I don’t know. Last week? I was showing Maddie my happy picture, and she came into the building.” Her eyebrows drew together as she recalled the day. “I think Maddie was upset.”

The bottom fell out of his stomach. “Oh my God. She’s really done it this time.”

“You’re not engaged?” Maddie’s hopeful smile almost broke his heart.

“No, Sweetie. I’m not engaged.” He squatted down until he was eye to eye with the child.

“Annie, this is really important. Does Maddie have a boyfriend? Do you know?”

Her face turned serious again. “She had one in Vancouver, but he hurt her. I saw him today at the rink. She was really mad that he came here and she told him to go away.”

Brent could have kicked himself. He should have stuck around, but the pain of seeing Maddie with someone else had been so sharp....

He stood up and looked out over the dance floor. “Annie,” he said. “I’m sorry we didn’t finish our dance but I have to leave now.”

She smiled up at him. “Are you going to see Maddie?”

“Yes, I am.” He kissed her on the top of her head, interrupted Chase and Lily long enough to get her address and then sprinted toward the parking garage.

* * *

“You’re going to be a handful, I can see that.” It was hard not to laugh. The puppy was adorable, even if he had shredded the newspaper and then left a little puddle on the floor of her bedroom.

“You definitely need more space.”

She walked into the living room, and he followed her, nipping at her jeans. When she’d realized that she’d be following the puppy around all evening, she’d put on her oldest jeans and a sweatshirt with a faded SFU logo.

She loved dogs. When she was younger, they’d had a black cocker spaniel. Her father had named him Sailor for the white patch on his chest. He’d been a devoted family dog until he died at the age of fifteen.

The buzzer sounded. The dog gave a bark and then jumped back; he seemed surprised that the

sound had come from him.

“Now who could that be?” she said. “Probably someone forgot their key and wants to be buzzed in.”

He padded along behind her to the hallway and began to lick her bare feet. She picked up the handset to the intercom.

“You stop that,” she said, laughing. “Hello?”

“Maddie?”

“Brent?”

The dog looked up at her, alerted by her tone of voice.

“Do you have company?”

She didn't process his question at first. She couldn't believe that he was downstairs.

“Brent? What are you doing here?”

The dog barked.

“Well, if you'd let me come up, I'd explain. Is that a dog I hear?” He sounded relieved.

“Yes, it's Annie's puppy.”

“Maddie.”

“Yes?”

“Put your finger on the button, or whatever it is you do, and let me in.”

“Oh.” She pressed the button.

She picked up the puppy and danced him into the living room. “Brent is here,” she crooned into his ear. “Or am I daydreaming?”

The door buzzer sounded.

“Guess not,” she said. She ran and opened the door.

Brent was leaning against the door frame, gasping for air.

“What's the matter?” She peeked out into the hall. “Isn't the elevator working?”

“There were some people...” He made a gesture with his hand. “...so I ran up the stairs.”

She stepped back, and he staggered inside. “Don't be such a baby. We're only on the fifth floor.”

He stopped and looked at her. “Are we having a fight?”

She still couldn't quite believe he was here. "I hope not."

He reached out and scratched behind the dog's ear. The animal squirmed to be let down and

Maddie placed him on the floor.

She crossed her arms in front of her. In this position it would be easier to catch her heart when it flew out of her chest.

"So what's going on, Brent? Why are you here?" The dog jumped up against her legs, but she ignored it.

"Annie told me what Cynthia said, Maddie. She is not my fiancée. We are not engaged. Never have been."

"But..." Joy surged up inside. "So you're not..." It was too good to be true.

"And I'm sorry I didn't stick around today. When I saw you with that guy, I figured it was too late." He unwrapped her arms and held her by the hands. "I drove away."

"You saw me with Allan?" She tried to remember what had happened. "Oh. He put his arms around me, didn't he?"

"Yes, and I couldn't stand watching, so I took off."

Her voice softened. "Why, Brent? Why did you take off?"

"Like I said, I...oh come here, woman." He pulled her closer. "I'm the one who should be holding you, Maddie." He pulled back and looked into her eyes. "Is that okay with you?"

"Very okay." She raised her lips for a kiss. His mouth claimed hers in a fierce, possessive kiss that left her breathless...and wanting more.

"We have a lot of time to make up for," she murmured, pulling him closer for another kiss. "I think it's going to be a long night."

The dog barked once, then settled down to wait, his head resting on his paws.

Epilogue

Christmas Eve – Drummond Ranch

“Maddie! Lily!” Annie greeted them at the door. The puppy stood at her side, wagging his tail. “I got a dog!” She hugged Maddie and whispered ‘thank you’ in her ear. “And I got a sewing machine!” She took Lily’s hand and pulled her away to inspect it.

Chase and Brent stood in the hallway, and Maddie was struck by their similarities. They may not look alike, but both were honourable men who loved their family. It didn’t get much better than that. Her gaze connected with Brent’s.

“Come inside,” he said, relieving her of her coat. “I’d like you to meet my mother and father.”

* * *

The dog had been relegated to his basket in the mudroom while they ate dinner. Annie objected at being separated from her new friend, but Brent was firm. “We have to train him now, or you won’t be able to manage him later.”

“I think I’ll call him Snowball.” She looked to Maddie, then Lily for approval.

“Sounds good to me.”

“I like it.”

They spoke at the same time.

The child’s happy gaze took in everyone at the table. “You know, I think it’s going to be a good Christmas.”

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Fallen Angel

Chapter One

Laura didn't need an intervention to know she had problems, which was why she was doubly surprised when she walked into her grandmother's house and saw all the people who, for whatever reason, still loved her.

Time seemed to stand still. With one hand on the screen door and the other clutching the door frame, she contemplated turning around and leaving. At least long enough to down another pill. For one irrational moment she was thankful that she'd showered and washed her hair this morning. As if that meant they'd go easy on her. But that wasn't going to happen; she could see from the five determined pairs of eyes that no one here was going to cut her any slack. That's the way it worked, wasn't it...on those television shows? Her throat went dry and she looked at her grandmother, who was seated next to her father on the couch.

"Could I get something to drink, please?" She gave a weak smile. "Diet Coke if you have any, Gran." She started to make her way toward the kitchen but Jenna, her friend since childhood, jumped up. "I'll get it."

They're probably afraid I'll make a run for it out the back door, she thought to herself. And they may be right. The shock was beginning to wear off, and she took in the two remaining people in the group. Rachel Ellison, the head nurse from St. Mark's and a woman she didn't recognize.

The woman stood up and motioned for Laura to sit down in the big chair in the corner. Laura almost giggled; it reminded her of a wedding shower where the bride-to-be was the center of attention.

The woman extended her hand and Laura shook it. "My name is Myrna Hyslop. I'm an intervention specialist and I'm here to help your friends and family."

Jenna came back into the room. Ice cubes clinked in a tall glass and she held a can of coke in the other hand. She placed both items on the table beside Laura and gave her friend a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Love you," she murmured, then went back to the other side of the room and sat down.

Laura poured half of the coke with a trembling hand and took a deep swallow. It tasted great, but

what she'd really like is another oxycodone to go with it. She tried to remember when she'd taken the last one, but her memory was fuzzy. She set the glass back down, frowning with the effort of concentration. Her memory was deserting her frequently these days, and she didn't like it.

There were times, like right now, when she couldn't even remember what had sent her down this path to self-destruction. But then the memories would come flooding back and she'd feel herself falling even deeper, if that was possible, into the black void that was currently her life.

She forced herself to look at the people gathered in her grandmother's living room. Her father, divorced from her mother for ten years now. Always there for her. It was her father who'd supported her when she announced her decision to become a nurse. He was the best, and she'd been genuinely delighted for him when he told her a few weeks ago that he'd found a woman to share the rest of his life with. She couldn't remember the woman's name right now, but her father was happy and that's all that mattered.

Next to her father was her Gran. As long as she could remember, a stable force in her life and a source of unconditional love. As a child, Laura had spent at least two weeks a year here at her grandmother's house in the Shaughnessy district of Vancouver. Those had been some of the happiest times of her life.

Rachel Ellison. Head Nurse at the hospital, and her supervisor. It was only a little over a month since Laura had fallen at work and broken her arm. The cast had come off two days ago and she massaged her arm, trying once more to recall what had precipitated that fall. She hated to admit it, but she couldn't remember that either. At least she'd done one thing right. She'd stashed away a supply of oxycodone before the accident. The doctor wouldn't prescribe any pain meds for her after the fall, informing her that a broken arm didn't warrant anything more than Tylenol, and besides a stronger pain killer could prove addictive. She'd almost laughed out loud at that, but had managed to nod in solemn agreement.

Jenna Harkness. Her closest friend since childhood. They'd grown up together in Quesnel, had done volunteer work at the local hospital, and had shared everything. Even after Laura had gone to Vancouver for her nurses' training, they'd remained close. Laura had been there when Jenna and

Drew got married, and had rushed to see each of her children only days after their birth. Her friend's eyes were all shimmery with tears, and she wondered if Jenna was about to tell her that she was no longer Godmother to Hayley and Mark. The idea was insupportable, and for the first time she felt real fear.

“...which is why your family and friends are here for you today.” The intervention specialist was speaking but Laura hadn't heard a word. What was her name again? She turned toward the other woman, hoping that her expression didn't reveal what she was thinking. That she didn't really need her help. Her family were wonderful to be so caring, but her current state was only temporary. She'd be back up to speed any time now.

She took another drink, playing for time. She'd come to love the sound of ice cubes recently. They signalled good times ahead. She frowned again. At least they were *supposed* to be good times, but in recent weeks she'd often wake up in the morning not remembering what had happened after the third or fourth drink in her favourite bar. She stared into the bottom of the glass. She'd better cut back on the drinking, or she wouldn't be in any shape to go back to work.

She looked at the faces around the room and put on a conciliatory smile. “I've been drinking too much” she said, nodding as she spoke to let them know she accepted the seriousness of her problem. “And I promise to cut back right away.”

Nobody responded. They didn't have to; it was clear that they didn't believe a word of what she said. This was going to be tougher than she thought.

“Okay, you're right. I won't just ‘cut back’. I'll stop drinking completely.” She tried another smile and held up the arm that had been broken, flexing her fingers as she spoke. “I'll be fit for work soon and I need all my senses for that.” She looked directly at her supervisor, who was looking at her oddly. “Rachel knows what I mean, right?”

The Head Nurse looked at the intervention specialist who nodded, then turned her attention back to Laura. “You're not coming back to work. I'm sorry, Laura, but I can't afford to have you back on the floors.” She gave her head a little shake. “I'd planned to talk to you the day you had your accident. In retrospect, I should have realized what was going on, but it never crossed my mind that you had a substance abuse problem. You were skating on thin ice then, but now you've gone

right over the edge.”

Laura wanted to tell her she was mixing her metaphors, but something held her back. “How can you possibly say that? I haven’t seen you since I got the cast on.” Her tone was getting desperate, but she couldn’t stop herself. “I’m much better now.”

For the first time she saw something like pity in Rachel’s eyes. “Laura, we saw each other a couple of weeks ago, at the staff picnic. You don’t remember?”

“Come on, Rachel. Stop kidding.” She glanced around at the others in the room. They were all looking at her gravely and her world seemed to tilt. She looked back at her supervisor and when she spoke her voice was little more than a whisper. “I don’t remember.”

“You were pretty high when you got there, so I’m not surprised.”

Laura didn’t intend to give up without a fight. “Come on, Rach, everybody has too much to drink once in a while; it’s how we blow off steam. You know that.”

“Your drinking is only part of your problems. It wasn’t until I discussed the situation with Dr. Rowland that I started to put the pieces together. He told me that you’d been taking various forms of oxycodone for a couple of months before you broke your arm.”

“And you believed Stew?” Laura was incensed. “He’s the one who gave it to me in the first place.”

She closed her eyes, dropped her head. She wanted to snatch the words back, but it was too late. Her first instinct was to blame Rachel for tricking her, but that lasted only a second. It wasn’t Rachel’s fault she’d become addicted. It wasn’t even Stew’s fault, much as she’d like to share the blame. She was an RN, for God’s sake; she’d known the consequences of self-medicating with oxycodone long before he suggested that she take one to help her get through the bleak days after Mattie died.

They all spoke after that. Her father, her grandmother, and finally her friend Jenna. Ashamed and resentful at the same time, she heard very little of what they had to say. She knew they loved her and wanted to help her, but what right did they have to interfere in her life? It wasn’t until Jenna spoke of her children that she raised her head and actively listened to her friend.

“I’m not giving up on you, Laura. You’re Godmother to my children, and I need you to be in their

lives. What if something should happen to Drew and me, God forbid? You promised to take care of them, and I need you to be well. Please say you'll go."

Go where? Laura wondered. Either they hadn't discussed that part, or she hadn't been listening. But did it matter? Not really. She knew what was in store for her; the location was the least of her concerns.

She knew better than to ask if she could go home. After brief but tearful goodbyes, the Hyslop woman bundled her into a large SUV and pulled out into traffic.

Laura was silent for the first half hour, watching downtown Vancouver slide by outside the window. "Where are we going?" she asked eventually, as they crossed the Lions Gate Bridge.

"Please call me Myrna", the woman said with a thin smile. "We're going to Vancouver Island. There's an excellent rehab center not far from Nanaimo, so we'll be crossing from Horseshoe Bay." She seemed remarkably upbeat. "I always enjoy the ferry crossing."

Laura remained silent for several moments. "What about my apartment?" she asked finally. She hoped it wasn't too much of a mess.

"Your father's going to take care of that for you."

Laura absorbed this information with a silent nod. She twirled a piece of hair around her finger and rubbed it against her lips. It was a gesture she used to make to calm herself when she heard her parents arguing, or when her mother had been particularly vile toward her. She dropped the piece of hair and glanced sideways to see if Myrna had noticed, but the woman was manoeuvring through traffic, approaching Highway 1.

"What about clothes, toothbrush, stuff like that? And who's paying for all this?" Laura hadn't meant to sound belligerent, but the words came out that way.

Myrna narrowed her eyes.

She probably thinks I'm a spoiled bitch. Maybe she's right. She smiled in an attempt to let the other woman know she meant well.

"Your father sent along a suitcase for you. You won't need a huge wardrobe at Water's Edge, but he and his new lady friend picked out some nice things for you."

“You saw what they bought?”

The other woman nodded. “Yes, it’s part of my job. You’ll be checked again when you arrive just to make sure. As for the money, your father and your grandmother have paid for that as well.”

“I can afford to pay for it.” Laura didn’t know why she’d said that. Maybe she just needed to assert herself. Everything else seemed to have been decided for her.

“Good. But that’s between you and your father now.”

They fell silent after that. Laura scarcely noticed the sparkling blue of the Pacific as they neared the ferry terminal. She was startled when Myrna spoke as they waited in line to board the ferry.

“I’ve made this trip many times.” She glanced across at Laura. “It never fails to inspire me, knowing that people like you have the strength to turn their lives around.”

Traffic started to move. Ferry staff motioned them forward impatiently and Myrna guided the SUV up the ramp and into the gaping mouth of the ferry.

Laura felt as though she were being swallowed whole. She fought the panic that threatened to engulf her as they drove into the gloom of the parking level. Until now, she hadn’t given serious thought to what lay in store for her. She took several deep, calming breaths. Whatever was coming, it couldn’t be worse than what she’d already been through...could it?

Chapter Two

Bradley Jamieson watched the shaft of sunlight move slowly across the bed. He willed it to stop, but it moved inexorably toward him. Soon it would be in his eyes, he'd be forced to move, and the woman in bed beside him would know he was awake.

She was lovely, no doubt about that. They'd been introduced a couple of weeks ago and he'd been attracted to her, but had been hesitant to ask her out on a date. Finally he'd texted her, and she'd replied almost immediately. Last night had been wonderful; an intimate dinner sitting side by side in a booth at his favourite restaurant, followed by a leisurely walk along the waterfront. He couldn't recall who had initiated the first kiss, but it had been long and hot; there was no doubt that they both wanted more.

The sex had been fantastic...for both of them. A small smile tilted the corner of his mouth as he recalled the number of times she'd told him what a wonderful lover he was.

She stirred in bed just as the sun hit him in the face. It was pointless to pretend any longer.

"Oh, you're awake" she said, propping her head on a hand and looking down at him with a smile. "Did you sleep well?"

He nodded. He'd had a rare night free of nightmares. That in itself was worth celebrating. He swung his feet over the side of the bed and rubbed at the stubble on his cheeks. The woman...what was her name? Ah yes, Alexa...scooted across the bed and was snuggling up behind him, pressing her breasts into his back.

"What are you going to do today?" She asked, fingers tiptoeing across his abdomen and heading south.

He grabbed her hand to halt its progress and brought it to his lips. He must be mad not to want more sex, but the price was too high. He knew what would happen afterward; she'd want to get to know him better. It was only natural he supposed, but it was more than he could take. He'd dated a few women since coming home and they all wanted to pry into his private life, to find out why he couldn't talk, and each one in her own unique way wanted to "fix" him.

He kissed her hand again and tenderly touched her cheek, trying to soften the refusal. He liked

her, he really did. She was gorgeous to look at, and intelligent, but he didn't want to get personal and she did. In that respect, she was no different from the others.

He grabbed his BlackBerry. *Leaving town today*, he typed and showed it to her. *Sorry* he added, *Had great time last night*. He didn't have to tell her that he'd only just decided to take his friend up on his offer of a bed for the summer—in exchange for working in the vineyards.

She gave him a sad smile. “You're not going to call me again, are you?” It was more of a statement than a question.

He smiled back, and shook his head. It was one thing he'd learned a long time ago; don't complicate your life with lies.

“I thought not.” She kissed him lightly on the lips. “You're a nice guy, Bradley Jamieson. If you come back to town and change your mind, I'd love to hear from you.”

And with that, she slipped into her clothes and was gone. Bradley stared at the closed door for several long minutes after she'd left and wondered if his life would ever get back to normal.

* * *

It didn't take long for Bradley to get organized and on the road. He'd texted Matt at the winery and been assured that he was still welcome. He'd laughed at the next line: ‘Will that old beast make the trip?’

The Norton was Bradley's favourite means of transportation. There was something freeing about being on the bike and it had been thoroughly serviced over several weeks the previous month; Bradley trusted it to make the trip.

It was noon by the time he left Comox. He planned to cross the ferry at Nanaimo and drive into the Fraser Valley tonight. Motels were plentiful in the area; hopefully he'd have a good sleep and make it to the Okanagan around noon the next day.

As he crossed the bridge from the Comox side of town to Courtenay, the Snowbirds, Canada's aerobatic team, streaked across the sky, practicing one of their manoeuvres. The Tutors were small compared to the F-18s that Bradley had flown in Afghanistan, but he still stopped to look every time he heard a jet engine. He paused by the side of the road to watch them, marvelling at the

precision flying. The aircraft dispersed and he gunned the motor, sliding smoothly into traffic. It was times like this that he felt guilty. Trained at great expense to be a fighter pilot, he was useless now. Okay, so he wasn't to blame, but that knowledge didn't help in the dark of the night, when he woke up to the horror of his memories, knowing that in his dream he'd been trying to scream, but unable to make a sound.

He rolled onto the five o'clock ferry with the other bikers, sent to their usual spot at the front. 'First on, first off' was their mantra. It was all part of the freedom of traveling by bike. He made his way to the upper deck, claiming a spot on one of the lifejacket storage containers. Here, with his back resting against the hull of the ship, he could watch not only the departure, but the eclectic mix of tourists that flocked to Vancouver Island every year. Virtually every European language was represented today, along with the ever-present, much-travelled Aussies and Asians. He sat back and closed his eyes, soaking up the sun. He hadn't bothered to shave before leaving home, and he counted on his appearance to fend off anyone who would otherwise want to talk.

"Excuse me, is this seat taken?" He couldn't quite place the accent. He opened one eye and shook his head. Her shoes identified her as European. There was something about their footwear that gave them away every time. That and the accent, of course. If he had to guess, he'd say she was Dutch. He made a broad gesture, indicating that she should make herself comfortable, and closed his eyes again. She pushed her backpack against the bulkhead, then sat back, resting against it. Her scent invaded his nostrils; it was something fresh, light and decidedly feminine.

Don't even think about it, he told himself.

She raised a hand in greeting and a young man came and sat beside her. Bradley smiled to himself; he didn't know whether to be disappointed or relieved.

* * *

Bradley Jamieson was one of those rare men who really loved women. At least the ones he'd been involved with told him he was a rarity, and judging by comments from the men he'd served with, they were right. The couple beside him were chattering away in a language he didn't recognize, and he relaxed, thinking back to his younger days.

He'd grown up in Comox, home to Canadian Forces Base Comox. It was inevitable, he

supposed, his desire to become a pilot. He knew every aircraft type that flew in and out of CFB Comox—American as well as Canadian. But even back then, he'd known that you just didn't walk through the gates and sign up. As a matter of fact, you were lucky if they even considered you, and a degree or two always helped.

And so in the summer holidays, while his friends went fishing or chased girls, he worked at every job he could find, saving money for his education. The grocery store paid the best; he made himself available for work any time they called, but it wasn't enough. In between, he mowed lawns and did yard clean-up.

It was a hot summer day when he first noticed her...really noticed her.

"Bradley" she called from behind the screen door. "Could you help me with something?"

He looked up, trying to recall her name. Oh yes, it was Mrs. Fraser. Her husband worked at the base, and according to her, had little time to spare for yard work. He'd noticed her several times that day; she seemed to be watching him through the kitchen window. He hoped she was happy with his work.

He wiped the sweat from his brow as he walked up the back steps. She opened the screen door and stood there, almost as if she were posing. She had on some sort of a top that tied under her breasts, leaving her midriff bare, and incredibly short shorts for an older woman. At least she seemed older to him. He tried not to look at her, but she had an amazing body and she wasn't shy about showing it.

"What is it?" he said, looking around.

She walked across the kitchen and he noticed that she was wearing what the school girls called 'wedgies' on her feet. They made her legs go on forever. He swallowed painfully.

She bent over as if to lift a cardboard box from the floor. "This box is too heavy." He could see the crease of skin where her legs joined her buttocks and got an instant erection.

She straightened up and turned back to him. "I was hoping to move this out to the storage shed, but it's just too heavy." Her gaze dropped to the level of his crotch and her lips parted. "Would you do it for me?"

"Sure." He didn't know how he got the word out; his tongue felt thick and clumsy in his throat.

She stood back a bit and he picked up the box. “The storage shed,” he said, trying not to look at her cleavage.

“Yes, and then come back in. I’ve made some lemonade.”

He practically ran to the shed and shoved the box into the first spot he could find. It was all he could do not to race up the steps when he got back to the house.

“So,” she said, handing him a glass of lemonade. “Do you have a girlfriend?”

He swallowed half the glass in one gulp. He wasn’t quite sure where this conversation was going. “Sort of,” he said, wondering if she could tell he was stretching the truth.

“Aha.” She took a small sip from her glass, eyeing him over the rim. “And what do you do for fun?”

“I, ah, well, we...” How could he explain the fumbling and groping in the back seat of his friend’s car?

“Do you have sex?” She came closer. There was a musky smell about her. It was unfamiliar but oddly arousing. “I mean, I hear about young people these days and it all sounds so different from when I was your age.” She placed her glass on the counter then took his glass and placed it beside hers. She was so close to him now that her breasts were almost brushing against his chest. At least when she was this close she couldn’t see that he was hard again.

Or maybe she could. She ran a finger over his lips and his mouth dropped open. She slid the finger inside his mouth and then withdrew it, putting it in her own mouth. He was afraid that he was going to come right there, in her kitchen. That would be mortifying and he closed his eyes, trying to regain control.

She touched his face again with her fingertips, tracing the line of his jaw, then down his neck, resting her hand against his chest. Her fingers tweaked his nipple, and he groaned aloud.

“You’re really a very handsome young man,” she said. Her voice had changed. It was husky, and when he dared to look into her eyes they had darkened. She slid a hand lower and cupped his erection. “Would you like to make love to me?” she asked, running her hand up and down the length of him.

He could only nod.

“Then come with me,” she said, and walked up the half flight of stairs in the split-level home.

He followed her into a cool, dark bedroom. “What about your husband?” he croaked. He wanted her more than he’d ever wanted anything, but he didn’t relish being beat up by an irate husband.

“He’s out of town on deployment,” she murmured, stepping out of her shorts. She was naked underneath. Her halter top soon followed, and she stood in front of him, naked. Her pubic hair had been trimmed and he stared at it. He’d never seen anything like that before, not that he had much experience with naked women.

“Know what I was doing this morning while you were working outside?” She lay back on the bed, watching him undress.

He could care less what she’d been doing. All he could think about was what was being offered and he wanted to get it before she changed her mind.

“I was watching you and wondering what it would be like to make love to you.”

He tore off his shorts and his erection sprang free.

“Oh, come to mama,” she said, reaching for him. “I don’t imagine you want to wait any longer, do you?”

He thrust into her. Once, twice, and then he exploded like nothing he’d ever experienced before. He lay there for a few moments, catching his breath, and then raised his head. “I’m sorry” he said, and meant it. “That wasn’t much good for you, was it?”

She smiled. “No, but you show great promise. Next time will be better.” She rolled out from under him and took his hand, guiding it to her innermost recesses. “In the meantime I’ll show you a sure fire way to please a woman.”

And she did. That afternoon and many more throughout that magical summer. She was an inventive teacher and he was an eager student. By the time school started again and her husband had returned from his posting, Bradley had acquired more sexual experience than most men gain in a lifetime.

* * *

The ferry shuddered as it moved away from the dock. Bradley opened his eyes, disoriented for a

moment. Then he remembered where he was. He supposed he should go and get in line for some food. He didn't mind the wait; it was something to do during the crossing. Besides, he needed some energy and his wits about him for the hectic pace of traffic on the mainland.

End of Excerpt

Fallen Angel is available at Amazon.com:
<http://www.amazon.com/dp/B006GEQ1AC>