

A man with a beard and a red Santa hat with white fur trim. He has a green glow over his face and chest. He is wearing a red Santa suit with white fur trim. The background is a snowy forest with blue trees and falling snow. The entire scene is framed by a gold border with Christmas ornaments at the top.

Sandra R Neeley

How
My
KRYNCH
Saved
Christmas

An Otherworldly Christmas

A fluffy, light-colored cat with a grumpy expression, wearing a red Santa hat with white fur trim. It is sitting in the bottom right corner of the image.

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Thank you for everything!

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How My Krynch Saved Christmas

An Otherworldly Christmas

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For Christmas lovers and haters alike!

About This Book

One bitter, disillusioned, post-menopausal human female who's experienced so much pain that she can't even enjoy Christmas anymore.

One large, green, alien bounty-hunter with a no-nonsense attitude who wants nothing more than to slip onto the forbidden planet (Earth), capture his targets and get out before anyone notices he's there.

One very irritable, grouchy cat named Satan Claws, who tolerates no one but the woman who liberated him from the shelter.

Can they somehow all manage to save each other, and maybe Christmas, too, while they're at it?

This is a fun, quick, Christmas story of only about 26,000 words that is meant to make you smile.

This book is a work of fiction. All characters, plot, places, circumstances, situations and everything it entails are products of the author's imagination. All are human-dreamed, human-imagined, and human-created.

Warning: This book is intended for mature readers. This book contains situations, sexual and otherwise, as well as

violence and/or abuse both real and implied that may be disturbing for some readers. If you are offended by these subjects, please do not buy this book.

Chapter 1

“Nooooo!” Grace insisted dramatically.

“But, please?!” Bethany whined. “You know it’s my favorite time of year. And you promised!”

“I did not promise.”

“Yes, you did.”

“Only to make you stop pestering me about it. I didn’t mean it,” Grace confessed.

“I don’t understand why you can’t just do this one little thing for me.”

“Yes. You do. You know I hate this time of year, and you know why I hate this time of year. And as someone who knows that, you should know better than to beg me to be a part of this stupid tradition you dreamed up.”

“It’s not stupid. It gets everyone in the neighborhood together. Everyone bonds and catches up, and gets to express their inner Elf, and we can just relax and take a day off from all the rush and stress of Christmas. And you used to love it, too.”

“Having to find, buy, or make an outfit for a costume themed Christmas party is not relaxing and stress free. Especially for those who don’t like Christmas, don’t look forward to it, and will as of almost four years ago, have to attend alone — again.”

“Maybe it’s a good thing, though. I’ve told everyone to feel free to bring a guest or two this year. Maybe you’ll meet your Prince Charming.”

“More like my Grinch Charming, with my luck. Besides the last thing I want is another Prince Charming.”

“Please come.”

“No. You always try to set me up with someone.”

“I do not!”

“You do, too. And they never want to be with me, and it just makes me feel worse.”

“I don’t try to set you up.”

“Do you really think I’m that stupid?”

“I don’t think you’re stupid at all. I think you’re very smart. Very beautiful. Very independent, established, sexy, witty...”

“That right there is the problem. Stop describing me like that. People think they’re getting Cindy Crawford instead of a cantankerous, middle-aged, overweight, fluffy woman who’s suspicious of everyone and all their shit.”

“You undervalue yourself.”

“You overvalue me.”

“I like you!”

“Why, though? It’s not my charming personality. Is it the ever-present awkwardness that is my social gift? Maybe the embarrassing attempts at conversation that always fail? Is that what you need to feel better about yourself?”

“Stop that. And, please, just come to the party.”

“Not a good idea.”

“You’ll make me very happy.”

“It’ll make me very sad.”

“You never miss it.”

“And I always regret it. At least for the last four years. Please, just give me a pass this year.”

“Look, I let you off the hook with the Christmas decorations, didn’t I?”

“Only because I gave in and put up a strand of white lights.”

“Around your front picture window. On the inside. You were supposed to put them all along your roof and doors and the other windows, too.”

“Be glad you got what you got.”

“I don’t want you alone for Christmas. You spend way too much time alone.”

“It’s not Christmas. It’s more than two weeks before Christmas. And I’m not good company. It’s better if I’m alone. Other people like it better that way, too.”

“Only because you never let anyone in. And you always manage to find something snide and biting to say. Stop being so bristly!”

“Let’s see how open and welcoming you feel when your husband of twenty years leaves you for his mistress because he got her pregnant and is now giddily happy over their second impending child after lecturing you all your married life about how much he didn’t want a child and how selfish you’d be if you did, so you wasted your entire youth on the rat-bastard and now you’re too old for anyone to want, and it doesn’t matter anyway because there’s no chance of a child for you with anyone.”

Silence met Grace’s outburst.

“I’m sorry,” Bethany finally said. “But you can’t let him dictate your life. You don’t have to defer to him anymore. Don’t let him determine the rest of your life.”

Grace sighed. “Other than spouting bouts of vitriol about him and his baby-mama, I don’t have it in me to care anymore. I’m so tired of not being enough, Bethany. Every man I’ve met the last four years has wanted nothing more than a booty call here and there. I can’t anymore. I’m just not interested. Me and Satan Claws are going to wing it on our own from now on.”

“Still can’t believe you named that cat Satan Claws.”

“Excuse me, but you know his full name is Satan Claws the Murder Floof. He’s a sweet baby kitty, and since I got him at Christmas, he needed a Christmassy name.”

“Grace, honey, Satan Claws the Murder Floof is not Christmassy.”

“Depends on the point of view.”

“And he’s not a kitty. He’s a huge, scary freaking cat.”

“He is not.”

“Grace, he’s as big as my dog and growls at everyone and everything.”

“Because he shares my outlook on people in general.”

Bethany sighed resignedly. “Look, this year it will be easy. Just pick a Christmas costume. Doesn’t matter what you want to be. Mrs. Claus, an angel, a Christmas tree, a Christmas ornament, a candy cane, an elf — whatever it is, just pick one. Anything.”

“Is Edward coming?”

“No! He doesn’t live in the neighborhood anymore. It’s a neighborhood party.”

“He came last year, and he didn’t live here anymore. He still came, and he brought his baby mama. Way to distract me, and make me enjoy the holidays again, Bethany.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know Michael had invited him. This year, though, I made sure that he wasn’t invited.”

“How?”

“I sent him an uninvitation telling him that he is not invited and neither is she.”

“Did he answer?” Grace asked, her voice going soft and defeated.

“He said thanks for the tone of my uninvitation, and that they couldn’t come anyway because his wife has morning sickness twenty-four hours a day and their three year old has strep throat.”

Grace took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I hope the baby feels better. I also hope she wanders around the house drinking out of every glass and cup they put down and licking every fork they’re trying to eat off of.”

“Grace!” Bethany chided.

“What? I said I hope she feels better. It’s not her fault her parents are lying, cheating assholes.”

“Are you going to come to my party or not?”

“Not.”

“It starts at 8:00 P.M.”

“I’m not coming.”

“That gives you four days to be ready. And I know you’ll be late, so I’ll see you around 9:00 or 9:30.”

“I still won’t be ready.”

“Be here by 9:30 P. M. at the latest or I’ll bring the party to your house.”

“Can I bring Satan Claws?”

“No! He scares people!”

“Then I’m not coming.”

“I’ll see you no later than 9:30 P. M.”

“Fine,” Grace snapped.

“Bye!” Bethany chirped jovially.

Grace pressed ‘end call’ on her cell phone and stood there looking out of the window at the silent, serene snowfall. Nothing about it felt serene tonight, though. Almost everything in life lost its magic the day Edward had walked out of their door to build a life with another woman. Even the snow she’d once loved so much lost its appeal. Living in Minnesota meant lots of snow once winter arrived. A loud, plaintive rowr from her right got her attention. She looked down to see a stunningly gorgeous white, Maine Coon cat, looking up at her. He was larger than average for his breed,

and really didn't like anyone but her. "It sucks, doesn't it, Satan Claws?"

Satan Claws rowred again, but this time he lifted a huge paw to pat at her leg.

"Alright. Hold on. I'm going to need wine for this." She poured herself a glass of deep red wine, then emptied an entire can of tuna onto what was actually a cookie plate for kids to leave cookies out for Santa, and carried both into the living room. She put the cookie plate of tuna on the window seat in her picture window and plugged in the single strand of white lights she'd adorned the frame of that window with. She smiled as she admired the warm glow of the white lights framing Satan Claws with the snowbanks out in the front yard illuminated by the moonlight outside. "I hate Christmas, Satan Claws," she said with a tear spilling over her lashes and slowly tracking down her face.

Satan Claws glanced up at her between bites, then went back to eating.

"I'm alone. Everyone else is out there loving each other and celebrating togetherness and family. I don't need it shoved down my throat." Grace watched the cat as he finished his dinner and reclined in his favorite spot in the house — the window seat — as he started cleaning himself.

"Just let me stay in my house by myself. I'll see you mid-January," she grumbled as she took her wine and her phone and settled in her favorite overstuffed chair. She started scrolling for some kind of Christmas costume she could order and have arrive in the next couple of days. Vocaly criticizing everything she saw, she suddenly grinned. Then she laughed. "That's it. I found it."

Satan Claws looked up at her as he licked his paws, seeming to urge her to get over it.

"I'm working on it, Satan. Found one. Don't think they'll be real impressed, but it works for me. If nothing else, it'll keep away whoever she's roped into coming to meet me. She does it every year and still hasn't admitted it. Doesn't matter

anyway. No matter who she's chosen in the past, it never works out. They're never heard from again."

Satan Claws lifted his lip and hissed a little.

"Yep. Same," Grace said.

Chapter 2

“We’ve received information indicating all three of them have taken shelter on Earth.”

“It’s a protected planet; it does not allow extra-terrestrial visitors among its people, Flog.”

“It’s Command Sargent Major Flog! And I didn’t say they’d received permission to be there. I said we’d received intel indicating they were there. It is imperative that we locate all three fugitives and take them into custody before they cause an interplanetary incident.”

“Hunting them on a protected planet will cause an interplanetary incident.”

“Not if no one knows you’re there. Which is why we’ve hired *you*. You achieve your objective and get off the planet before anyone knows you’ve even been there even when it’s not called for.”

“Any tracker that can’t isn’t worth hiring. And just to be clear, you’ve not hired me yet.”

“We’ve sent the customary amount of credits to your account.”

“Without request. I’m not interested in working on Earth.”

“Is it because you can’t?”

Krynch stood up and approached the real-time vidcom terminal. He took a moment to look the male who’d just insulted him in the eyes — all five of them, which was no small feat since they each moved independently on their

stalks. “There is nothing I can’t do. The question is, am I willing.”

“Are you?” the male challenged.

“I’m not.”

The male’s face turned a particularly unpleasant shade of orange. “What will it take?” he demanded.

“I’m not interested at all.”

“We must recapture these fugitives. It is your duty to do so!”

“I don’t serve the Grand Sovereign, you do. I didn’t lose the fugitives, you did. This has nothing to do with me,” Krynch insisted.

The hum of chattering among the five eyed male and those who stood behind him was almost intolerable. Just as Krynch decided to end the vidcom call, the male spoke to him once more. “I’ll double your fee.”

“Triple,” Krynch countered.

“That’s outrageous!”

“Then find someone else.”

“No one else can get onto Earth and back without being detected.”

“That is not my problem.”

More chattering and animated gestures between the group of males on the vidcom monitor erupted before the main one sliced his arm through the air and all the chattering stopped. He turned to face the vidcom terminal and Krynch. “If you bring back all three, I’ll pay you three times your fee. Two of them, twice your fee, only one of them, I pay you your standard fee.”

“Do they have to be alive?”

“Yes, they do.”

Krynch shook his head in irritation. “Pay me in advance. I’ll bring all three.”

“And if you don’t I’ve overpaid you!”

“Then the next time you lose perpetrators you’ve taken into custody, I’ll track them for free.”

“If you take our money and you don’t bring back all three, there won’t be a next time for you at all.”

“Are you threatening me?” Krynch asked, with a touch of humor in his voice. Flog knew exactly who he was hiring, and he knew exactly why Flog was hiring him. Flog had screwed up and allowed someone his precious Grand Sovereign wanted in custody to slip away which was why he was negotiating with Krynch. “You know I don’t respond well to threats, Flog. We’ve been down that road before.”

“If I pay you in advance, I have no way to recoup my money if you don’t perform satisfactorily.”

“If you don’t pay me in advance, I don’t go to Earth at all.”

“I have no guarantees!”

“You have the guarantee that I’ve never failed to capture any individual I’ve been hired to track — and you know that. And you have the guarantee that if you don’t pay me in advance, I’m not going at all.”

Flog was growling and snarling while an even deeper orange color flushed his face. “I’ll accept your terms,” he finally bit out.

“Send me the intel, contract, and the rest of the credits,” Krynch said, reaching out to end the vidcom connection.

“If you’re caught, if an incident arises, we do not know you or why you’re there.”

“I don’t get caught,” Krynch snapped, ending the video feed. He backed up and let himself slouch into the pilot’s command chair he’d been sitting in until Flog’s insolent tone had caused him to get as close to Flog’s image as possible in order to make his feelings on his behavior known. Sighing he pulled up his account on the small communicator he wore on his wrist and watched it until his credits increased by the

agreed upon amount, then brought up the communications receptor on the main console of his cruiser and chose the file Flog had obviously immediately forwarded, had his own private software check it for viruses, then downloaded it once he was sure it was clean.

Krynych read through the intel briefly, paying particular attention to coordinates where the three fugitives were last seen. Pulling his keyboard out of its storage nook, he typed in a list of commands, sitting back and watching as his computer began to perform the functions he'd commanded it to. Eventually as the slice of space he was looking at on his screen became more and more focused, he began to be able to make out a small blue and white planet in the distance. It continued to become larger and larger on the screen until he was actually looking beneath its atmosphere, able to make out a multitude of other colors of the planet's natural landscape. He leaned forward and typed in the coordinates supplied in the intel provided by Flog. He sat up straighter and his face brightened when he got a good look at the landscape he'd have to maneuver. "It's like home! It might even be pleasant," he said, nodding satisfactorily to himself. He watched the screen, growing ever more at ease with having to spend time on Earth as he watched the drifts of fluffy white snow, the ice hanging from every plant and horizontal surface. "Cold is good," he announced to the silence around himself. He pushed his keyboard away, causing it to swing on the support it was mounted to and tuck itself back out of the way, then approached the main computer banks of his small ship. He took the ship off autopilot long enough to change the trajectory, then watched to be sure the ship adjusted itself. Once he confirmed all his commands had been carried out, he reengaged autopilot and left the small flight deck to prepare himself for the hunt. According to the information Flog sent him, the three targets he'd be hunting had embarrassed the Grand Sovereign by walking out of his palace with at least half of the crown jewels in their possession. He'd have admired their work had they not left all three of the Grand Sovereign's daughters pregnant as well. One did not take advantage of females regardless of who their father might be. It was

completely unacceptable. For that alone he'd have hunted them, but he'd never tell Flog that.

Standing in his armory, he looked through a multitude of options. He usually avoided planets like Earth. They did not have the technology to mask the use of his own preferred technology so that his actions would go unnoticed. Its society was antiquated in comparison to the rest of the universe at best. Looking at his options, he decided plasma would be his best bet. A plasma blast to stun them, then a materialization process that would send them back to his ship via a transporter beam, which would then deposit them into their individual holding cells was his plan. The problem with that was that he'd have to return to his ship with each capture to ensure they were properly secured and didn't have access to the rest of his ship. The plasma encasements would have to be activated around each cell to make sure they couldn't use their ability to manipulate energy around themselves, change their form or manipulate their surroundings and free themselves as they had when Flog had incarcerated them. It would also deter their ability to communicate with each other. They'd effectively be in solitary confinement with the plasma encasement around their cells. It was frustrating to have to waste so much energy on them, but because of their species, it was unavoidable. They could manipulate energy at will. They could wreak havoc on any kind of ecosystem by assuming the appearance of any member of that ecosystem, as well as absorbing most kinds of energy to rejuvenate themselves at will. Plasma was the only answer. It would capture them. It would keep them secure. After each capture he'd have to return to the ship to secure them, then return to the planet surface to continue the hunt for the rest. It was not opportune, but it was workable.

Chapter 3

Grace sat cross-legged on the floor in front of her full length mirror before reaching for a ponytail holder and pulling her heavily silvered hair up into a ponytail on top of her head. She used a curling iron to tightly curl the strands of hair, resulting in a gathering of corkscrew curls covering the top of her head. To those curls she added curly lengths of green ribbon to intertwine with her own curls. She scowled at herself before she reached for her first makeup brush — which Satan Claws promptly grabbed from her and proceeded to kill. Grace sat and watched him for a few seconds before shrugging and reaching for a different one. She dipped it into the bright green face paint and with a few dexterous swipes of the brush had most of her face painted green. She wiped the brush off on a wad of paper towels and dipped the brush into black face paint and traced her mouth in black paint before extending the corners of her lips and painting an exaggerated smile and eyebrows onto her face. When she was done, she used her eyeliner to heavily line her eyes, and put extra coats of mascara on her lashes.

She eyed her costume, hanging on the back of her bedroom door, and decided that she needed to make all skin that would show green as well. After wiping the brush on the paper towel again to get most of the black paint off, she dipped it into the green face paint again and covered her neck and the backs of her hands in the stuff before dabbing a little on the edges of her ears as well. She dropped the brush onto the paper towels and stood up, grabbing her empty wineglass as she went back to the kitchen to refill it. “Hate this crap,” she grumbled. “Just want to stay home!” she shouted to the walls of her empty home.

With a refilled wine glass in hand, she returned to her bedroom and set about pulling on the bright green furry onesie, the big furry green monster slippers, and the piece de resistance — a teeshirt that said exactly what she felt about the whole situation. ‘CHRISTMAS PEOPLE SUCK’ was printed in bright red letters on a bright green background with hints of Grinch fur peeking out from behind the letters. Grace turned to look at herself in the mirror and chuckled. “She said wear whatever costume I want.”

Grace downed the rest of the wine in her glass, then swayed a bit on her feet as she returned to the kitchen to put her once again empty glass on the counter, take her keys off the hook by the door and head off toward the party. It was 9:30 P. M. and she could already hear her phone buzzing where she’d left it on her bed. It was no doubt Bethany looking for her. She had no intention of bringing her phone with her, or of answering it.

“Rowr”

Grace looked down at Satan Claws who looked up at her expectantly. “Already filled your cookie plate with tuna. And I left the blinds open in the picture window so you can hunt squirrels through it until I get back. I know how much you hate those little bastards. Maybe one day I’ll let you go catch his ass and then he’ll stop chewing his way into my attic!”

Satan Claws purred a bit.

“I love you, too. I shouldn’t be long. Be a good kitty until I get back.” Grace turned and walked out of the back door, pulling it closed behind herself without looking back.

The door didn’t quite catch when Grace pulled it closed and slowly it eased open just a crack. Satan Claws looked at the crack in the door and sniffed the cold air drifting in through the opening. He considered it for a moment, but ultimately decided his plate of tuna was more interesting for the time being and turned his back on the open door in favor of dinner.

After dinner he wandered around the house until he found the makeup brush still heavy with green face paint on

the floor near the mirror where Grace had left it and rolled around with it and the paper towel it rested on for a while before becoming bored and wandering back to the picture window to sit and wait for Grace. He left green paw prints with every step he took, and when he jumped up to the window seat, he left green smudges there, too. After sitting there impatiently for a short time, the squirrels who insisted on teasing him through the window every night appeared. They actually taunted him through the window. Scampering right up to the window to hiss at him, safe in the knowledge that he couldn't get them through the glass.

Satan Claws watched them a little less irritatedly than usual, though, because he knew something they didn't. He turned his back on them, and hopped down from the window seat, leisurely taking his time as he walked through the kitchen. And once in the kitchen he used his paw to bat at the open edge of the door and pull it more fully open, then very calmly walked out of his nice warm house, on his way to have a few irritating squirrels for dessert.



Grace grinned to herself snidely as she made her way up the snowy, messy sidewalk toward Bethany's house. Just over a block from her own house, it wasn't much of a walk usually. But with the mess left from neighbors clearing their walks, there were small hills of snow all around her. Occasionally some were even as high as she was tall. She was fairly sure that once Bethany got a look at her costume, she'd make her go home. And that was fine. That was ultimately her end game.

Before she even got to Bethany's house, she could hear the Christmas music, laughter, and conversation as the noise floated out of the house. She slowed as she wove between the

vehicles filling the driveway and along the street. “Stupid party,” she grouched.

It really wasn't a stupid party. There was a time Grace looked forward to it and even helped organize and plan it, but her heart never healed from the betrayal she'd endured and she found it immensely painful to be around people who had love and devotion, and everything she thought she had and it appeared never would. She was halfway up the driveway when something from behind caught her attention. She stopped and canted her head just enough to better hear. A whooshing sounded behind her and she turned to see what it was, but there was nothing there.

Grace looked left, then right. There was nothing there, but she had no doubt she'd heard something. Her gaze zeroed in on a spot in the snow to the right of the driveway. It didn't look right. She walked over to it and looked down. A circle, a perfect circle was melted into the snow. It was as though someone put a round space heater down, waited until the snow beneath it melted but left all the snow around it intact, then picked it up and walked away. She reached out and held her hand just above the circle of thawed ground. Intrigued to find the ground warm, she stood and looked around for any other thawed places.

“So, are you coming inside, or are you just going to stay outside looking at the snow all night?” Bethany asked from the front door.

“This is strange. Come look at this. It's a thawed spot!”

“Things get thawed as people stand on them or put things down. Could have been anything.”

“But not like this,” Grace said.

“Are you coming in, or are we bringing the party to your house?” Bethany asked, getting back to her point.

“I'm coming,” Grace said, turning to face Bethany.

“Really? That's what you came up with for a costume?”

“You said anything I wanted to wear. I want to wear this!”

“It’s insulting.”

“Only if you think it’s about you.”

“I’m trying to help you make new friends, Grace.”

Grace turned her body sideways to squeeze past Bethany and into the house. She stopped halfway through the door and looked at Bethany, all trace of sarcasm gone. “I don’t want any new friends, Bethany. They might betray me, like Edward did. I can’t take that chance.”

“Oh, Grace...” Bethany said, as Grace stepped past her and into the house. Bethany closed the door and turned to follow Grace, blissfully unaware of the large green male who waited only until she closed the door to fire his plasma blaster at the fugitive who was busy shifting himself into a human appearing individual to better blend in with his surroundings. There wasn’t even a scuffle as the plasma surrounded the fugitive and rendered him immobile.

“I expected so much more from you. It’s not even a challenge,” he said disgustedly as he took hold of the second fugitive and transported them back to his ship.

The fugitive wasn’t even able to respond, but he glared as they vanished from sight. He was still glaring when they materialized in the transporter room of Krynch’s ship, and even more so as Krynch secured him in a plasma enforced cell across from his cohort’s cell.

“Wait here and be good little criminals while I go for your friend,” Krynch said, double checking to make sure that both males were secure in their cells, fully encapsulated in plasma which not only held them immobile, it prevented them from accessing energy of any type to be able to shape shift, or to create any chance at escape.

Chapter 4

Grace found a spot on a bar stool at the kitchen island. It wasn't exactly secluded thanks to the open floor plan of Bethany's house, but it did give her an opportunity to keep her back to the rest of the room while she sat facing the kitchen appliances and sipped the wine Bethany had waiting for her.

"Grace, honey, this is Al. He's a friend of Michael's from work. We've been telling him about you and thought you might like to say hello. Al, this is my friend, Grace," Bethany said behind her.

Grace closed her eyes and gave an imperceptible shake of her head. She breathed out an irritated breath, scooped up two tablespoons worth of guacamole on two chips and shoved the whole thing into her mouth before turning around to glare at good ole Al.

"Hi, Grace!" Al said.

"Mhmm," she answered as she chomped the chips and guacamole that overfilled her mouth.

"I hear you're not much of a party person. Or a Christmas person for that matter," he said, wearing his stupid fake smile.

Grace, who was still chewing and about to admit that she had really put far too much into her mouth, just sat up straighter and pointed to her shirt.

Al's gaze dropped to her shirt, then took in the rest of her Grinch costume complete with furry green monster feet slippers and burst out laughing.

Grace's brows furrowed as she watched the man and finally managed to swallow.

"I'm sorry. They warned me. They said you'd do everything you could to scare me away, and I was prepared, but I had no idea you had such a wry sense of humor."

"I have no sense of humor," she said.

"I bet you've dressed up as Wednesday from the Adams Family at Halloween, too."

She narrowed her eyes at Al. "What do you want?"

"Just to talk. See if we might be compatible."

"You're fifteen years younger than me — at least. Go. Away."

"Maybe I like older women," he said with an obviously over-zealous grin.

"Maybe that's because you've already worked your way through all the ones that are your age," Grace said with absolutely zero emotion.

Al looked her up and down, then turned to Bethany. "I don't need this shit. I tried." He turned and walked away and within minutes was engrossed in another older woman across the room, no doubt feeding her the exact same attitude and only slightly adjusted lines.

"You don't have to be so mean."

"He's gross."

"He's trying."

"By hitting on older women that he thinks will be glad to have him so they'll put up with his childish bullshit?"

"He's not that bad. He just thinks he's a little more attractive than he really is. At least he'd be someone to go to dinner with and maybe a movie."

"Yeah, if I paid, no doubt."

"What am I going to do with you?" Bethany asked.

“You’re going to get me some more wine and go take care of your guests.”

“Haven’t you had enough?”

“I still only see one of you, so obviously not.”

“Fine, but only one glass.” Bethany topped off Grace’s glass, then turned at the sound of her name. “I’ll be right there!” Bethany called out. She looked at Grace. “It’s my turn at Christmas Charades. You want to come play?”

“No.”

“Will you at least try to guess what I’m impersonating?”

“My best friend?”

“Huh?”

“My real best friend wouldn’t make me do this.”

“You haven’t met everyone I have to offer yet, tonight. You might like one of them.”

“Not if they’re all replicas of Al.”

“They’re not.”

“Go pretend to be a Christmas tree, Bethany.”

“How did you know that’s what I was going to do?” Bethany exclaimed.

“It’s what you always do.”

Bethany’s smile faded. “Oh.”

“But you do it well. You’re the best Christmas tree,” Grace said, feeling bad that she’d taken the fun out of Bethany’s game.

“What else could I do?”

“You could pretend to slide down the chimney.”

“Ohhh! Santa! Okay, I can do that!” Bethany said excitedly as she hurried away to take her turn at Charades.

A couple of people smiled and exchanged pleasantries as they went by, but most avoided Grace, which was fine with

her. An hour later she'd finished a bottle of wine and the entire bowl of guacamole when a familiar voice had her whipping her head around.

"If you'd take a little pride in yourself you might not still be alone," Edward said. "I want you to find someone and be happy, Grace. Realize that this is for the best."

Grace spun on her barstool, a hate-filled glare already in place. "What are you doing here?" she practically hissed.

"I thought about it and decided it wasn't fair for you to decide that I couldn't come to this party because you would be here. They're my friends, too."

"So you decided to come ruin the one thing I might be doing for the holidays."

"I'm not ruining anything, Grace. I'm just trying to show you that it doesn't have to be you or me. We can get along. We can be friends, and our friends don't have to choose. And you can be happy without me. You can be happy for me."

"The only thing I don't resent about my life right now is that you aren't in it. That's the good part."

"I'm here trying to be friends and you have to hurl insults. How adult is that?"

"It's about as adult as sleeping with somebody barely legal, getting her pregnant, and leaving me for her after demanding that I not even consider children because you hate children."

"Things change, Grace," he said impatiently.

"Obviously. Because for most of my life I thought we had each other's back. For most of my life I thought no matter what else I lost or what we went through, it would be okay, because we would have each other. I thought not having the kids I wanted wouldn't matter because at least I had you. But I was wrong. I kept my end of the bargain. You lied," Grace said before she slid off her barstool, walked over to the kitchen counter where the alcohol was, took a bottle of wine and started through the crowded party in a surprisingly relaxed manner on her way out of it.

“Are you going to harp on this forever? I’m trying to be the good guy here! I’m trying to make sure you’re okay!” he shouted as he followed her out of the house. “You have to learn to let me go.”

Grace stepped out of the house with every intent of fleeing, but his words caused her to spin around and face him right there in Bethany’s driveway, right outside Bethany’s front door. “Rat-bastard!” she shouted. “You don’t understand at all, do you? I’m not grieving you. Oh, I did, like anyone who truly believed they were married only to find out only one of them was invested in the marriage. But now, I don’t want you. I don’t miss you. What I miss is the kids I’ll never have. The family that I wish I’d have built. Am I bitter, you fucking better bet I’m bitter. But it’s not because I want you. Not because I care about you at all. It’s what I’ll never have that I resent. And it’s me that I hate over it, because if I’d had half a brain I’d have seen you for what you are before you made it perfectly clear for me. You will never be a good guy to anyone who’s known you long enough for you to find a way to take something, anything, from them. Because that’s what you do. You take. You better yourself at everyone else’s expense. You’re only here now because you know that everyone sees it now. And the only thing you’re doing is trying to make yourself look better to everyone who finally sees you for the selfish prick you really are.”

“If it makes you feel better to blast me, go ahead. I suppose in some way I deserve it. It’s okay. I understand. But I hope you really don’t believe after all our years together that I’m not concerned about you at all. I care! How do you think I felt when you blocked my number? How am I supposed to make sure you’re alright?” he asked.

“Actions, rat-bastard! Actions speak louder than words. You got someone else pregnant while married to me, while forbidding me to get pregnant. You walked out and left everything I thought we’d built before I even knew you were walking out. You’re not worried about me. You’re worried about you! The only things you’re doing here are A — trying to make yourself feel better by pretending you give a shit what I do and don’t feel while hoping I’ll tell you everything you

did is okay, and B — trying to make yourself look better to everyone who finally sees YOU, and C — you're pissed off because I no longer care! How dare I not give a damn what or who you're doing now, right? Narcissists do that. Classic narcissistic move.” Having delivered her opinions on the matter, she turned and walked away.

“I'm not a narcissist!” he snarled.

Grace spun around and looked at him. “Here's the thing that gets you the most. I don't care! You have to have everyone care. The moment I stopped caring I became attractive to you again. Go back to your baby-mama. Go back to whoever you're screwing around on her with — because I'm sure there's somebody out there you're tapping instead of her. Go die somewhere. Go be giddily happy somewhere. I just don't care, Edward!”

“What is going on out here?” Michael asked, with the rest of the party standing in the doorway behind him and watching out of the windows listening to the exchange between Grace and her ex-husband.

“I came to try to make peace with Grace. To try to prove that we can still be friends. I'm just trying to make sure she's okay, and she's so emotional we can't even have a conversation,” Edward said, attempting to rationalize his actions.

“Edward, I told you you weren't welcome here tonight. Bethany sent a message saying the same thing. You need to leave.”

“You see?” Edward shouted after Grace as she walked down the sidewalk toward her home. “You see what you did. Now my friends won't even allow me to be here.”

Grace didn't acknowledge his outburst, she just kept trudging through the snow.

“Why do you have to make things so difficult?!” Edward called out.

Grace simply held up a single hand as high as she could in the air, one finger extended so he could clearly see it and

continued on her way.

“Classy, Grace!” Edward yelled.

Grace snickered to herself as she shuffled through the snow. She was particularly pleased that she’d managed to upset Edward, and finally got a chance to tell him exactly what she thought about him — with witnesses. As she trudged through the snow she giggled at the idea of him begging for her attention. The fact that she’d blocked him really chapped his ass, and she liked that. But after a few more steps in the snow, she stopped giggling. She realized the rest of what she’d said to him was true. She’d been living her life miserably not because of what he’d done, but because of what she’d allowed him to do. Because of the things she’d never experience, that he was now experiencing, with someone else.

Chapter 5

Krynch stood beside a large snowdrift, paying close attention to the noisy gathering of humans down the street. He didn't particularly care about the gathering of humans, it was more the aggression of a male named Rat-bastard toward a female named Grace that caught his attention. Despite what he did for a living, Krynch was an empathetic being, and could easily read the anger and contempt brewing inside the human male just as easily as he could read the loneliness and resignation in the female.

What he didn't like was that the male was attempting to force the female to bow to his wishes through manipulation. It was his intention to make a fool of the female and cause everyone witnessing the confrontation to side with him. And the final part of the situation that had put Krynch on alert was the flash of a desire by Rat-bastard to harm the female.

Krynch looked over at the vicious little creature he'd come across, then back at the confrontation that had come to an end. The female, Grace, had removed herself from it, but if Rat-bastard gave any indication that he might follow the female, Krynch may end up providing a service to this planet free of charge, of removing Rat-bastard from its surface. There was no excuse for a male to mistreat a female ever, regardless of her species. If their coupling didn't work, there was no reason both parties couldn't simply walk away. Unfortunately, most males resorted to intimidation to keep the females where they wanted them.

He'd seen it first hand. He'd witnessed it as a youngling. He'd been too little then to do anything about it, but as soon as he'd grown big enough, he'd killed the male who'd harmed his dam and returned her to her own people, as she should have

been all along. Immediately after, he'd embarked on his tracking career and never looked back. He would never tolerate a male taking advantage of a female again.

An angry hiss brought his attention back to the white, furred creature. "What are you?" Krynch demanded.

The creature opened his mouth and let out a long, deep, threatening mewl.

Krynch raised his thick black eyebrow in surprise.

The creature, though significantly smaller than he was, wasn't intimidated in the least by his presence.

Krynch looked at the creature again, using his empathetic powers to feel for the soul inside the creature. "If you're there, I'll find you," he said. He'd been tracking the other fugitive for longer than he cared to and had convinced himself that he must have taken another shape to keep from being detected. This fluffy, white creature with blood on his face and paws, sitting in a mound of blood-stained snow with the remnants of the even smaller brown creature he'd just consumed, was a perfect contender for the fugitive. What confused him was the green blotches of coloration mixed in with the blood.

The creature opened his mouth and let out another threatening wail.

Krynch took a step toward it, thinking that he needed to be sure this was not the final target he'd been contracted to return to Flog.

"Hey! Hey, what are you doing to my cat?! Get away from my cat!"

Krynch turned and watched in dismay as someone who appeared as though they didn't belong on Earth stumbled toward him through the snow. The individual was green, much like himself, only they had fur, where his own skin was naturally green tinted but smooth. He watched as the person changed their grip on the bottle they held from one of simply carrying it, to one of better use of it as a weapon.

"Satan Claws! Are you okay?"

Krynch quickly realized the voice was that of Grace. The female who'd just been in a confrontation with Rat-bastard. He watched her closely, then accessed his communicator to scan for identification. His brows smashed together over his amber eyes as the results didn't line up with what he was seeing with his own two eyes.

"Did you hurt my cat?!" Grace demanded, stopping right in front of him, her hand still clutching the bottle like a weapon.

He shook his head slowly. "I have not touched this beast."

"Come here, Satan Claws," she said, eyeing Krynch suspiciously.

The cat made a pleasant sound, then calmly wandered off the snowbank, delicately choosing its path to the female and then circling in and out of the space between her ankles, rubbing itself on her as it looked up at Krynch defiantly.

"It's my sweet baby kitty. Yes, he is. Who's the best boy?" she cooed at the creature with the permanently angry look on its face.

"He is not the best boy. In fact, he's quite unpleasant."

"Because he doesn't like you," she said as she leaned over and stroked the animal's fur.

"He doesn't know me."

Grace shrugged, and continued to pet the animal's fur before she straightened up and focused on Krynch. She sized him up, taking her time looking twice from his head to his toes. "You're late," Grace said.

"For what?" Krynch asked.

"The party. And you're at the wrong house. It's down the street. The one with all the noise."

He nodded, realizing she thought he was searching for the group of people she'd just left, then clicked his boots together and performed a little bow. "Thank you."

“You’re welcome.” Grace looked him up and down critically again. “Grinch, right?”

“Excuse me?” he asked, surprised that she knew his name.

“You look a lot like the Grinch, but you totally missed in the footwear department. The Grinch doesn’t wear boots. He’s got large, fuzzy feet. See?” she asked, picking up one of her feet and wiggling it at him.

She obviously thought he was someone else, Krynch decided, as he watched the female lift her furred foot off the ground and started to topple over. Instinctively he reached out and grabbed her, steadying her. “Be careful, female. You almost caused yourself harm.”

She brushed his hands away. “Yeah, well, that’s what happens when you drink too much, then have a fight with your ex-husband, so you end up going home to drink more. Glad I didn’t have to hit you with this, I plan to drink it. Would not have been happy if I’d had to waste it. I still will if I have to, but I’m hoping it won’t be that much longer and I won’t remember my own name because I get to drink it.”

“It’s Grace.”

Grace looked up at him. “How do you know my name? Oh, never mind,” she said, as realization hit. “Bethany must have told you. Well, like I said, you’re too late. I left the party, I’m over it. I’m going inside.”

“Do you not wish to return to your friends?” he asked.

Grace held out her shirt for him to see. “Do you see this?”

“Yes, I do,” he said, nodding and smiling pleasantly at her shirt that proudly proclaimed ‘CHRISTMAS PEOPLE SUCK’.

“Really?”

“Yes.” He assured her, but had no idea she was trying to show her disdain for the time of the year. He didn’t even know

what time of the year it was on Earth. All he knew was that she was showing him her clothing.

She, however, assumed he agreed with her sentiments.

“You’re not bad, you know? It’s a shame you didn’t show up before Rat-bastard ruined everything.”

“I do not like Rat-bastard!” he said emphatically.

“Me either!” she exclaimed dramatically as she wavered on her feet again and ended up on her ass in the snow. Grace burst out laughing the minute she landed in the snow and Satan Claws started purring as he walked back and forth across her lap.

“You must be careful! You could injure yourself!” Krynch warned.

“Meh, it’s alright. I’m too drunk to feel it if I do.”

“I will help you,” Krynch said.

“Good deal,” Grace said, allowing Krynch to take her by the arm and the waist to get her to her feet again. Once she was standing, he picked up her bottle and handed it back to her, too.

“Here is your bottle.”

“Thank you. You are so nice. And a big muscley Grinch, too. I like muscles. I like the Grinch. He doesn’t like people. People ruin everything.”

“They can, if you are associating with the wrong people. Rat-bastard is the wrong people.”

“Yes, he is!” she said, lifting her bottle in the air to emphasize her declaration. Her gaze wandered down to Satan Claws who was cleaning his paws again. “You got into my makeup didn’t you? I see the green. But why are you red?”

“He has killed a small brown creature,” Krynch said disapprovingly.

“A brown one?! Oh! You finally got that furry little shit!” she said excitedly. “Yay, Satan Claws! Maybe now he’ll stop invading my attic and chewing on my electrical wiring.”

She started laughing as she heard her own words. “Of course, he will. Little bastard’s gone now.”

“What is an attic?” Krynch asked.

“Up there,” she said, turning and pointing to a small round window near the top of her home. “The top part of my house.”

“This is your home? The dead creature invaded your home?”

“He did! Repeatedly for the last couple of years. He chews on my electrical wires every damn winter and if I didn’t get someone to come repair the damage my house could catch on fire. It almost did last year! If I hadn’t been home to smell the melting wires where he’d chewed off the insulation I could have lost everything I own. I could have died! I know some people think they’re cute, but they can burn down your house! That’s why I went to get a kitty and I found Satan Claws. And it’s been just me and him ever since. He’s my best friend. Nobody else cares too much, except for Bethany, but she doesn’t really get me. Satan Claws does. He’s my family.”

“Satan Claws is your family?” Krynch asked, not quite sure what species she was. His communicator indicated human, but he’d never known a human to be green and have fur. And now she was claiming the unhappy, white-furred creature was her family. Perhaps she was a mixture of species.

“Yes.” She looked toward her house, then back at Krynch. “It’s cold. I’m going inside. Want to have a drink with me? I mean, unless you want to go on down to the party.”

Krynch looked at her home, then up the street toward the party, and down the street behind where they stood.

Grace watched him as he searched for an excuse to leave. “You know what, never mind. It’s okay. I just figured since you were coming to the party to meet me anyway you might want to have some wine, talk for a while. But you don’t have to.”

Krynch could feel the hurt from what she perceived as his rejection begin to fill her and he didn’t like it. “I have lost

track of a friend. Will you allow me to find my friend, then I'll come back?"

Grace looked up at him suspiciously.

"I give you my word, I must only find my friend and be sure that he is secure, then I'll return."

She shrugged nonchalantly, putting on a false bravado. "You don't have to, but if you want to, you can. Completely up to you."

Krynch gave her another deep bow. "I shall return."

"Yeah. You do you. I'm going inside. I'm getting cold." She turned toward her house and wobbled a bit, causing him to reach out and steady her again. "I got it!" she snapped, holding her hands out at her sides. "I got it."

"Very well," he said letting her go and watching as she made her way toward her home followed closely by the creature she called Satan Claws.

Krynch watched Grace go into the house and close the door. He continued watching through the large picture window as she wobbled over to it and pulled on a long string causing a covering to fall down over the window, then swiped at the covering a time or two in what he thought was an effort to block his view of the inside of her house. But she didn't manage it as well as she thought, her efforts caused only one or two of the slats to fall into place to block the window. The next thing he saw was Grace removing her shirt from her body, then lifting her feet from the floor one at a time and kicking them so hard the furry coverings she wore on her feet flew across the room much to the delight of Satan Claws who pounced on them.

Krynch's eyes grew large as he realized her furred feet were not actually her feet, and he continued to watch, mesmerized as she removed an equally furred green suit of clothing and kicked it away from herself as well. "Certainly explains why her readings were human, yet she had fur to match my skin color," he muttered.

She turned to Satan Claws and picked him up, cuddling him before she paused momentarily to look out of the window.

Krynch was dumbfounded as she stood there, blearily trying to focus on the white haze of snow outside her window, not even aware he was still standing on the sidewalk watching her in all her glory. She wore a tiny pink garment which contained her large voluminous breasts as they strained to break free from their binding, and a small scrap of material of the same color covering her reproductive parts. She was stunning. Her body was full of soft folds and round curves and tempting valleys. He quickly moved closer when she moved toward the inside of her home, his face pressing against the glass of the window as he battled the need to see more of her.

He watched her stumble into an adjoining room with many cabinets and remove a glass from one of them before opening the bottle she carried and pouring some of its contents into it. She took a long sip before she turned to a basin behind herself, turned on a stream of water and added a detergent to the water before dipping her hands into it to scrub away the green color that covered them. When she finished, she splashed water over her face and neck and washed them, too, before drying herself with a towel. She picked up her drink and wandered back into the room with the large window Krynch still stood at the side of and curled into a chair. Grace sipped her drink as she pulled her legs up into the chair with her, and he almost choked at the views he got.

All he knew was that of all the females he'd ever spent time with, this was the first one that he felt deep within his soul. She called to him. And it wasn't just her soft supple body, it was the emotion he could feel coming from her. Her soul was bruised. Her heart hurting.

As he stood admiring her at the window, she reached up and pulled the tie from her hair, letting the shiny, silvery mass fall to curl softly around her shoulders. She was the most stunning female he'd ever laid eyes on.

With laser focus he leaned against the window, feeling an innate need to get closer to her. "Grace," he whispered.

Then he jumped back with a snarl in his throat as Satan Claws launched himself against the glass between them, hissing and growling.

A low warning growl of his own permeated every cell of Krynch's being as he tried to control the reaction Satan Claws had startled out of him. "You cannot kill the beastie, Krynch. Your Grace loves it," he reminded himself aloud.

Forcing himself away from the window he turned and faced her neighborhood. Somewhere nearby was the third fugitive, and he'd have to locate that fugitive before he could hope to spend any time with Grace.

"I'll be back, Grace," he promised as he dematerialized, transported to the next street over and began his search there.

Chapter 6

Krynch prowled the neighborhood for several hours growing more and more irritated with every passing moment. He should have found the fugitive by this time, so there were only two options — the last fugitive had left the area to avoid capture as his cohorts had suffered, or he'd become much more adept at avoiding detection than Krynch expected. Either way, it was getting later, the temperature was dropping, and he was unable to think of anything other than how long he'd been wandering the streets of this small neighborhood while Grace waited. He knew she expected him not to return. And he knew the longer he stayed away, the less likely she'd be receptive when he did return.

Accessing the many features on the communicator he wore on his wrist he did another complete scan of the area. Nothing but species native to Earth showed up in his results. It was apparent his target wasn't hiding among them, or he'd have registered as non-native DNA on the scan. Growing more impatient by the moment, he decided that it was necessary for his own peace of mind and need to refocus that he return to Grace's home to be sure she was safe. He could easily continue his search for the last fugitive from her home. True, he preferred to do his tracking personally, the old fashioned way, and he'd have to go out to apprehend the fugitive, but this was a very different circumstance and called for him to be present in another location until the target was located.

He accessed the transport feature on his communicator and quickly returned to Grace's home. Arriving there he went straight to her door and tapped on its surface. She didn't answer. Walking around to the front window, he looked inside

and saw her sleeping in the same chair she was in when he left her. He tapped again.

Grace didn't move, but Satan Claws regarded him with utter disdain before he jumped from the window seat to Grace's chair, and curled up on her chest staring Krynch in the eye while Grace continued to sleep. In truth, she wasn't simply sleeping; she was passed out from far too much alcohol.

Krynch's chest rumbled as he watched the infuriating cat exert his dominance, or perceived dominance, over Krynch. Giving it only another second or two of thought, Krynch transported into Grace's home and looked down at her tenderly while she slept. When Satan Claws lifted a lip to show Krynch his displeasure, Krynch totally ignored the furry beast, instead moving to the window and closing the blinds before covering both Grace, and by default her beast, with a blanket. He stood over them, looking down at Grace until Satan Claws dug his way from beneath the blanket and hissed at him again.

Krynch focused on the furred creature and hissed back, showing his own sharp teeth.

Satan Claws seemed to sit up a little straighter, and Krynch even wondered if the expression that entered the furry beast's usually disdainful gaze was amusement. Deciding to believe that it was, he spoke to Satan Claws. "Hush, beastie. I will keep her safer than even you can. I wish you no harm."

Satan Claws watched Krynch for a few more moments before folding his paws beneath himself and settling in to nap on Grace's chest while she slept off her overindulgence.

Krynch sat quietly, using his communicator which was synced to the computer back on his ship, to make grid searches for the last fugitive. He didn't have any idea of the time that had passed until a sound coming from the kitchen pulled him from his focus.

Krynch paused his grid search and looked up, his head canting to the side with an ear angled toward the kitchen. Sure enough, he heard it again... a slight scratching noise, followed by a rattling. Getting to his feet and moving closer to the kitchen, he glanced through the open area to see that there was

another entrance on the far side of it. As he watched the doorknob began to move back and forth — the source of the rattling noise — but remained locked.

Hushed cursing could be heard right outside the door and moments later, without warning, one of the small squares of glass shattered, its small pieces falling to the floor of the kitchen.

Krynch moved quickly to the side, placing himself in the shadows in a hallway as he waited to see who was trying to gain access to Grace's home as she slept. Once he'd hidden himself away, he was amused to see Satan Claws silently move across the living room, jump up onto the counter top in the kitchen, then up onto the top of the cabinets mounted just far enough below the ceiling to give him access to their tops. He ran along the top of the cabinets, the fur of his head and back just barely making contact with the ceiling itself as he deftly avoided the few decorative jars and vases Grace had placed there, then tucked himself away atop the cabinet closest to the door that had just been broken. The cat settled down and was barely noticeable with its white fur pressed between the white of the cabinet and the white of the ceiling as he glared at the door, his small pink nose twitching nonstop as he waited, his body tensed like a spring ready to release the power gathered in its coils.

Casting a quick glance at Grace, Krynch saw that she continued to sleep, unaware of the intruder trying to gain access to her home, and thereby her person as well.

A hand extended through the empty space the broken glass used to be in, and turned the deadbolt before unlocking the knob. Whoever the hand belonged to didn't fumble or feel around — they knew exactly where the deadbolt was located, and the direction the lock on the doorknob needed to be turned to unlock it, which told Krynch that this person was intimately familiar with the door itself, and most likely Grace's home, too.

The door slowly opened and Krynch watched as a male quietly stepped into the kitchen, then carefully closed the door behind himself. He locked the doorknob and the deadbolt,

which further sealed his fate. He was trying to prevent Grace from having easy exit. If she tried to get away, any extra second he could cost her might give him time to get to her and stop her.

The male turned from the now locked and closed door and looked around, not noticing Krynch hiding in the shadows as he started across the kitchen.

Neither did he notice the white blob of fur above his head that had changed direction and was stalking him across Grace's kitchen from his spot above the cabinets. At the exact same moment the male sneered as he saw Grace lying passed out in her chair, Satan Claws launched himself at the male's head and face.

The male screamed as Satan Claws wrapped all four legs around his head, a low, threatening yowl pouring from the depths of his little Maine Coon soul as he used teeth and claws to slash at the man while he stumbled back and forth doing all he could to pull the cat off his head. It was to no avail, though, Satan Claws had his claws sunk deep into Edward's face and scalp as he constantly latched and unlatched his jaws, clamping his teeth to Edward's face in a new place each time.

Krynch's eyes widened and he laughed wholeheartedly, seeing Grace's beastie in a whole new light.

The male continued shrieking, stumbling, and bouncing off furniture as he finally managed to grab a handful of Satan Claws' long white fur and begin to pry the cat off his head with both hands.

Krynch shot forward, taking hold of the male's wrist and snapped it with very little effort, bringing forth more screams, though blood-curdling this time, as the male dropped to his knees.

"Do not harm that beastie!" Krynch snarled.

"You broke my arm! You broke my arm!!" the male accused hysterically.

At that moment, Krynch realized who the male was. His voice identified him as Rat-bastard. The male who had tried to

manipulate and belittle Grace in front of her friends. The male who'd broken her heart and her confidence by destroying her trust. The male who'd had a fleeting thought of doing her harm. Obviously the thought wasn't as fleeting as Krynch had believed.

"No, I did not. I broke your wrist. There is a difference, of which I'd be happy to demonstrate!" Krynch snapped threateningly as he maintained his hold on Edward's arm.

"I've already called the police. I dialed 911! Leave my house, now!" Edward screamed as he sobbed.

"This is not your home. This is Grace's home. And this is Grace's beast who's fought you valiantly. You have no business here."

"I have every right here! I bought this home!" Edward insisted.

"You do not have ready access. You broke the glass to get in. You deserted this home and all in it willingly. You have another female and younglings. You have no business here. No reason at all to be here, and had only nefarious intent. Had I not been here, you might have harmed Grace, and then I'd have had to leave your mutilated body as a warning to any others who might presume to be so stupid. As it is, they'll find you dead. Mutilation isn't fully necessary this time."

"You can't do that! You can't kill me! People will miss me! They'll know I'm gone."

"They will know you are gone. None will miss you. Why are you in Grace's home?"

"I don't have to tell you anything!" Edward spat.

Krynch shrugged and snapped the arm where he held it.

Edward screamed and began to hyperventilate before finally passing out.

"What's happening?" Grace said softly from just beside her chair in the living room.

Krynch turned to her as he dropped Edward's broken arm and allowed the man to fall to the floor. "He planned to

harm you.”

Grace looked at Edward’s unconscious form on her floor, then her gaze traveled to Satan Claws. “Satan Claws!”

The cat meowed at her and hurried toward her.

“He’s covered in blood! Is he hurt?”

“He is not. The blood is Rat-bastard’s.”

Grace leaned over and scooped up Satan Claws. As she straightened up Krynch was relieved to see that she was wearing a small smirk. “He’s my good boy, isn’t he?” she asked the cat as she stroked his fur, some of which was streaked red.

“He is a worthy adversary,” Krynch said, admiring the cat’s desire to protect its owner.

Edward started moaning as he woke.

Krynch looked down at him, then at Grace.

“He shouldn’t be here. What if you hadn’t been here?” she said, her voice a little shaky.

Krynch smiled at her displaying pointed teeth when he did. He reached out and grabbed Edward by the shirt, intentionally jostling him as much as possible so that his broken bones grated against each other. He lifted the man until he was looking Krynch in the eye, and was being held almost two feet off the ground. “Why are you in my female’s home?”

“It’s my home!” Edward insisted on a whimper while trying to cradle his arm and wrist against his side.

Krynch shook his head in disgust as he took two steps to be closer to the counter top, then, slammed the man’s face into it.

Edward’s scream ended in sobbing tears.

“It is not. It belongs to my female, and everything about her belongs to me. Would you like to venture a truthful answer now? Bear in mind that with each untruth I will force your body against this surface again.”

“She made me angry!” Edward shouted.

“Because she didn’t want you anymore.”

“She’s supposed to respect me! I deserve respect!”

Krynch leaned in until he was only inches away. “No one respects you. No one.” Krynch lifted his other hand and placed it around Edward’s neck. He let go with the hand that had been grasping Edward’s shirt and raised him higher in the air so that he was looking up at the man. “You planned to harm my Grace. The penalty is death. There is no reason for you to live any longer.” Krynch started to squeeze with the one hand holding Edward aloft around the neck.

Edward’s face was beginning to turn red, he was gasping like a goldfish out of water. His eyes were huge and round and beginning to bug out.

His one good arm grasped Krynch’s wrist trying to get it to release his throat.

“Wait...” Grace said from the living room.

Krynch looked her way.

“Don’t kill him.”

“You want him to live?” Krynch asked disbelievingly.
“He planned to harm you!”

“Not particularly, but I don’t want you to be punished for killing him. Unfortunately you would be. Or I would be. He’s not worth it.”

Krynch looked from Grace to her former male and back to Grace again. “What shall I do with him?”

“Whatever won’t get you into trouble.”

Krynch stood there for a few awkward moments as Edward hung from his extended hand, gasping and now approaching a bluish color, while Krynch considered his options. “I’ll return, Grace,” he said simply.

Krynch walked outside and dropped the male into the snow.

As Edward started scooting away as best he could through the slush, Krynch advanced on him. “You will leave

this house. You will not return. You will not speak to Grace. You will not look at Grace. You will not think of Grace — or I'll return. And when I return, I'll skin you alive and gift your skin to Grace as a prize. Do you understand?"

Edward didn't answer, he was busy trying to keep out of Krynch's way.

"Do you understand?" Krynch demanded.

"Yes! Yes, I understand!" Edward responded as he began to cry again.

Krynch ran his fingertip over his communicator causing it to exhibit a lighted pattern, then lifted his arm and pointed it, and thereby his communicator at Grace's home. Her home was covered in a pale greenish-white laser light, similar to a spiderweb. "Do you see the security lasers over Grace's home? If you approach, you will be taken into custody and held until such time as I decide to torture you to death. Do you see the security lasers?"

Edward lolled on the ground, still trying to scurry away from Krynch.

"Do you see the security lasers?!" Krynch shouted.

"Yes! Yes!"

"Good. Please come back to visit. It will save me having to hunt you later. Enjoy your evening." Krynch snatched him up off the ground and strode out to the street where he tossed him toward the end of the street the party was taking place on. Edward lobbed through the air like a deflated soccer ball, screaming like a child as he fell with a thud only a hundred feet away, where he continued to scream for help.

"You are no male," Krynch said, turning his back and returning to Grace's home.

Chapter 7

Grace stood shakily in the middle of her living room with Satan Claws in her arms. Eventually she realized that if she didn't sit down, she'd fall down. She was still dealing with the effects of over-indulging, so she carefully lowered herself to the edge of the chair she'd been sitting in before the shouting had awakened her. She replayed over and over what she'd awakened to, and what could have happened if her Grinchy visitor hadn't intercepted Edward. Did he plan to hit her, rape her, all of the above? Her tears started so unexpectedly that she didn't even notice. She sat there with tears coursing silently down her face as she listened to her Grinch's voice speaking to Edward. Then suddenly, she heard Edward scream and had no doubt that her Grinchy savior was killing him.

Hurrying into the kitchen to look out of the door, she didn't realize until it was too late that there was broken glass on the floor. She stepped on it, cutting the bottom of her foot.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow!" she cried, hobbling over to the kitchen island where she could put down Satan Claws and try to pull the broken glass out of her foot. It only took seconds, then she hobbled toward the kitchen door once more.

Krynch opened the door and walked in.

"What happened? You didn't kill him?" she asked.

"No, I did not kill him. However, I most likely will — eventually."

"As much as he deserves it, you can't. If he's found dead, the police will consider me a suspect. Everyone at the party witnessed our argument. Everyone knows how much

I've struggled, how much I hate him. I'll be the one they suspect."

Krynch stood his ground listening to her explanation for wanting Rat-bastard alive. And while he seriously questioned the governing forces of her society, he did understand her concern. "I'll find a better way to keep him away from you, then."

"Thank you."

Grace turned slowly, painfully as she attempted to keep her injured foot off the floor while making her way back to the living room.

"What has happened?" Krynch demanded, swooping in from behind her and catching her up in his arms.

Grace shook her head and closed her eyes. She wasn't capable of handling much more tonight. "I stepped on the broken glass from my door."

Krynch could feel her overwhelming sense of drowning emotionally. She was almost at the point of not being able to communicate she was so overwhelmed. "All will be well, Grace. I give you my word that you are safe."

"Can't do this anymore," she whispered through her tears. "Can't pretend to be strong. Can't pretend nothing's wrong and I'm better alone. He's stolen so much from me. I want to forget."

"I can't make you forget, but I can help you move past it."

"How? He came here tonight to hurt me. Who knows what he'd have done? If he wanted to talk he would have just knocked, but he snuck in here in the middle of the night and broke a pane in my door to get in! What would have happened if you'd not been here?"

"But I was here. And I won't allow him to hurt you. I won't allow anyone to hurt you," Krynch said as he gently placed her on her sofa and sat down beside her.

Grace curled up in the corner of her sofa and let out all her pain, all her fear. She held onto a throw pillow and had a good cry, forgetting momentarily that Krynch was beside her, and that her foot was still bleeding on her furniture.

After several minutes she felt hands on her and remembered that she wasn't alone.

Krynch lifted her from the sofa and settled her on his lap where he held her like a child until she cried herself out. He didn't complain about how long she cried. He didn't shush her. He didn't try to give her advice or tell her she shouldn't be crying. All he did was hold her and soothingly drag his fingers over the back of her shoulder again and again so she'd know she wasn't alone.

Once her sobs and tears turned to hiccups, she sat up enough to rest her head on his chest. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For being a blubbering mess. The least I could have done was wait until you leave to fall apart."

"Why? Your emotions are the result of the pain, the frustration, the loneliness, the betrayal. They will consume you if you do not address them and allow them to run their course. You feel them. Fight with them, or don't. It is your choice of how to abolish them. I will sit here and watch over you as you do."

"I'm so tired."

"I know."

"I just don't want to be here anymore. I don't want to have to feel these things. I don't want to have to think these things. I just want to be happy. I just want to get in the car and drive off into oblivion. Go somewhere that I'll never be recognized. Somewhere that I'll be free to be me without everyone watching to see if this is the day that I'll fall apart."

"All will be well, Grace."

"How do you know that? How can anyone know that?"

"I will see to it that you are happy before I leave here."

“Doesn’t matter,” she said, sitting up, pushing off his chest and placing her feet on the floor to stand. “Ahhh!” she gasped, when her injured foot hit the floor.

“Let me see your injury,” Krynch said.

“It’s fine.”

“It is not fine. Allow me to see it,” he insisted.

Grace flopped down on the sofa next to Krynch and gave him the same exact expression Satan Claws gave him every time the beast looked at him.

Krynch grinned as he knelt on the floor in front of her and gently lifted her foot to get a better look.

“Why are you smiling?” Grace asked.

“Because that scowl is just like the one your beast wears.”

Grace’s scowl immediately turned more extreme.

“You are only looking more and more like him,” Krynch said, as he continued to examine her cut. Finally he nodded. “If you will trust me, I will heal it.”

“Heal it?”

“Yes. Will you trust me?”

Grace looked at Krynch. She thought of him protecting her, subduing Edward, snatching Satan Claws out of Edward’s hands so Edward couldn’t hurt him. She nodded. “Yes. You’ve done more for me in the few hours I’ve known you than anyone else ever has. I trust you.”

Krynch unzipped one of his pockets and took out a small egg shaped device. He ran a fingertip over its top and it began to glow with a blue-white light. He moved it closer to Grace’s foot and she sat up a little.

“What is that?” she asked worriedly.

“Trust me,” he repeated.

Grace looked at Krynch, then at the device he held, and leaned back against the sofa again, giving in fully to her

instinct to fully trust him. She watched silently as he passed the device over the cut in her foot several times, holding it just centimeters from the injury. A warmth suffused her foot before several minutes later he smiled and ran his thumb over the sole of her foot. The completely healed sole of her foot.

“It is done.”

Grace sat up and brought her foot up as close to her face as she could to get a good look at it. “There’s only a tiny scar. I wouldn’t even see it if I didn’t know where it was.”

“I told you I would heal it.”

Grace looked at her foot again, then at Krynch. She took in his face, his hair, his sharp teeth. His green tinged skin and amber eyes, the way he’d handled Edward as though he was a rag doll, the way he’d healed her foot.

Grace put her foot on the ground and leaned toward him slowly, her hand out to smooth across his skin. “It’s not makeup is it?” she asked softly as her fingers stroked his jaw and cheek.

“Makeup?” he asked.

Grace lifted a hand to her face, which was now for the most part her natural color. “The green I painted on my face, it wasn’t really my skin color. It was makeup. Yours isn’t.”

He shook his head hesitantly, as he looked directly into her eyes. “Please do not fear me.”

“Who are you?”

“I am Krynch.”

She snorted as she tried not to laugh.

His brows bunched over his eyes.

“I’m sorry. I’m not laughing at you, I’m laughing at the irony.”

“Irony?” he asked.

“Something that is exactly what you thought, but different.”

“I do not understand.”

“I thought you were dressed as the Grinch, now you’re telling me your name is Krynch. It’s ironic.”

Krynch smiled at her, and she noticed the pointed edges of his teeth again. “What is the Grinch.”

“It’s a fictional character. Someone who hates Christmas and everyone that loves it. He’s green and he wears a little red suit, and he steals all the Christmas gifts and decorations and food because he hates it so much when they celebrate. He just wants to ruin it for everyone.”

“Why does he hate celebrations?”

Grace shrugged as a single tear fell as she blinked. “He’s all alone. They all have each other, something to celebrate, people to love and he’s all alone.”

“Like you,” Krynch said.

“I used to love Christmas. All the lights and gifts and friends and family and food. But now I don’t even put up a tree. I don’t put up Christmas lights or decorations. I don’t visit friends, and I have no family.”

“You loved this Christmas celebration?”

“I did. It’s a celebration that holds so much meaning and symbolism. But after Edward... I don’t even want to think about it anymore. It’s ruined.”

Krynch thought about all the brightly colored lights and the whimsical decorations he’d seen in front of most of the homes he’d passed since arriving on Earth. “The varied color lights, the large, strange animals and the animated creatures in front of the houses... they celebrate Christmas?”

“Yes. I put the white lights on my window because Bethany begged me to, but I just can’t make myself go full scale anymore.”

“If you loved this celebration, you should not let him take your joy from you.”

“He left me on Christmas Eve. He ruined Christmas for me. He’s taken the time of year I loved most from me. I just don’t even want to recognize it anymore. I don’t have anyone to celebrate with anymore anyway, except for Satan Claws.”

“You have much more than Satan Claws.”

Grace lifted her gaze to Krynch again. “Who are you? Why are you here?”

“I am not supposed to be here.”

“Where are you supposed to be?”

“Elsewhere. We are not allowed to approach Earth. But I was hired to track three fugitives who’ve taken refuge on your planet. I’ve found only two. Once I find the other, I’ll have to return to my ship so that I can take them to the male who hired me.”

“So, you’ll be leaving soon.”

Krynch nodded, then closed his eyes as she ran her fingers over his jawline again.

“I’m sorry,” she said, pulling her hand away the moment she realized she was still stroking him.

“Don’t be. I enjoy your touch.”

Grace sat there on her sofa, her mind surprisingly calm at this male’s claim that he was an alien and sent here to bring back fugitives. “So, you just happened to be on this street. Happened to meet me. Happened to be here when Edward broke into my house.”

“Meeting you was an unexpected occurrence. Being here when Edward attempted to hurt you was not accidental. I came back here as I promised. I was merely waiting for you to awaken when I became aware that someone was attempting to gain entry.”

“I’ll be honest, I barely remember telling you you could come back. My head is still swimming. My body shaky. I drank way too much.”

“Do you want me to go?” he asked.

“No. I don’t.”

“Then I won’t. At least not yet.”

Grace gave him half a smile.

Satan Claws jumped up on the sofa and wandered across her lap, purring as he chose his favorite spot right beside her to curl up as she stroked his fur.

Grace looked up at Krynch. “You protected my cat.”

“You said that Satan Claws is your family. I would not allow your family to become injured. I am deeply disturbed that even your foot was injured. I would especially like to kill Rat-bastard now. He caused it.”

“It’s okay. You healed it.”

“It should not have happened!”

“There would be so much more trouble for me if he died. As much as I wouldn’t mind him disappearing, I can’t take much more upheaval. So, please don’t kill him.”

“He cannot go unpunished. You decide how you want him punished, other than death, that is exactly what I will do.”

Grace thought about it and looked directly into Krynch’s eyes. “I want him to be afraid and dread each and every coming day as I did. I want his life to spiral out of control and no matter what he does he can’t fix it,” she said vehemently as she sniffled. She let her hand fall from Krynch’s face and flopped backward on her sofa again. “I’m exhausted, Krynch. I need to sleep. I drank far too much. I’ve felt far too much. I need to sleep it off.”

Krynch leaned forward and scooped her into his arms. Holding her close to his chest, he cradled her like the most precious treasure. “Tell me where your sleeping chamber is. I will take you there, then I will remove the glass so that you don’t cut yourself again.”

“Down that hallway,” she said, lifting her chin to indicate the direction she meant. “But I’ll clean the glass.”

“Allow me to, please,” Krynch said, as he carried her down the hallway and with his sense of smell took her directly to her bedroom. He sat her on the edge of her bed and stepped back. “I will be only a moment.”

Grace lay atop her covers, waiting for him, wondering what the rest of the night would bring. And why she felt so trusting of him already.

She tried to listen to Krynch cleaning up the glass in her kitchen, but couldn't hear a thing at all. About the same time she was beginning to doze off, he was suddenly standing beside her again. “I am back, Grace.”

“Oh, I thought you left.”

“Only for a moment. I had to remove some of the glass.”

“Only some of it?”

“It was only necessary to place some of them in different locations. The rest I placed outside in your refuse pail.”

“I'm too tired to care,” she said. “Will you stay for a while now?”

“I will stay for a short while.”

Grace sat up and reached behind her back. “Thank you. You might want to look away. I'm taking this bra off.”

“Bra?”

She smirked at him as she unsnapped the clasp and the bra that had hugged her body so snugly, went lax. She pushed it off her arms and stood long enough to pull her covers back and climb into bed. She looked up at him and smiled.

“I am glad I didn't look away.”

“Are you?”

“Yes. You are a beautiful female.”

“I'm old,” she said, fluffing her pillow and arranging her covers.

“What is your age?” Krynch asked.

“I’m fifty-three years old. I have gray hair. My skin is not as tight as it once was. And I’m not a fool, I can see it. I know that I will be alone most likely. But I’m only handling one crisis at a time. Today is ex-husband trying to kill me crisis. The age thing and alone thing is for another day.”

“You are just old enough to choose your own mate in my culture. And your skin is soft. And your hair sparkles like the stars. Any male would be greatly humbled to have you at his side.”

Grace lay in her bed watching the strange, yet intriguing male looking down at her. She knew he had to leave, she’d most likely not ever see him again. This was the only chance she’d ever have to spend time with him. And she really wanted to spend time with him. “Do you have to go out to search for the other fugitive now?”

“I have decided that it is best if I stop searching for a short while. He will think I’ve given up and left the planet without him.”

Grace nodded thoughtfully. “I am still a little drunk, but not enough to not know what I’m doing. I’m at the need to sleep it off point.”

“You have said so.”

“But I don’t want you to leave. I’m raw, and needy, and... lonely. And I don’t want to be alone. Will you stay with me a while? More than a short while?”

Krynych nodded.

Grace scooted over toward the other side of the bed and threw back her covers.

Krynych looked down at her. “Am I to undress?”

“If you’d like to.”

“This is my flight suit. It should not be in your bed.”

Grace closed her eyes and laid her head on her pillow. “You can leave it on, or take it off. Whatever you want.”

Krynch considered his next move for a second, then decided to take it off. If he did nothing more than lie beside her with her soft, warm body against his, it was so much more than he'd expected.

Chapter 8

Grace opened her eyes when she felt the mattress shift from Krynch's weight as he lay down next to her.

Krynch lay on his back, his head turned to look at her.

Grace smiled at him, and scooted closer, lifting his arm to duck beneath it and lay her head on his chest.

Krynch curved his arm around her back, holding her close.

Grace relaxed against him, all the stress in her body seeming to melt away.

"I like this," she said.

Krynch didn't speak. He couldn't. He was busy assimilating to the feeling of having his female beside him, having the walls he'd so carefully constructed crash down around him, allowing himself to feel a part of something that mattered. Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, he pulled her closer and tightened his arm around her.

Grace laid a hand on his chest to see if she could feel his heart beating as rapidly as she felt it beating. "Your heart is beating so fast."

"It's not accustomed to this experience."

"What is it accustomed to?" she asked.

"Me. Just me."

Grace smiled and lifted her head to look into his eyes. "Thank you for staying with me."

"I am honored."

Krynch raised his hand from her shoulders to gently caress her hair.

Grace slid far enough up his chest to be able to reach his face. She looked into his eyes the entire time she adjusted her position, giving him ample time to pull away from her, or even push her away.

He did neither. He lay perfectly still watching her as she slowly brought her face nearer and nearer to his. When she finally dipped her head to press her lips against his, he didn't move a single thing except his lips. They seemed to have puckered of their own volition and eagerly welcomed hers.

Grace pulled away from him just enough to focus on his face. "You won't bite me, will you?"

"I will not bite you," he answered, smiling softly at her inference of his sharp teeth.

Grace wasn't sure if he liked it, or if he didn't, or if she should continue. She wasn't used to being the aggressor in bed. "Can we, do you... I mean..."

Krynch smiled at her, again displaying those scary teeth, that somehow didn't unnerve her at all, and cupped the back of her head, pulling her gently toward another kiss. When their lips met this time, he licked her lips, sucking one of them into his mouth before letting it go and pressing his lips to hers again.

When she opened her mouth to let out a little gasp, he seized the opportunity to seal their mouths together, taking their kiss deeper than she'd expected.

She moaned in response and began climbing him, rubbing her body against his as she tried to get closer.

Krynch was still cupping the back of her head, controlling the kiss and her movements. He took advantage of the fact that she was allowing him to lead their encounter and rolled her to her back, kissing her every inch of the way.

Grace's hands roved his back and shoulders until he raised up off of her, holding himself on his muscular

outstretched arms so he could look down at her body. Instinctively she tried to cover her breasts, her belly.

Krynch shook his head, his jaw set as he gazed into her eyes with a hard expression. “No. Do not hide from me.”

“I just, I’m not comfortable with you seeing me.”

“Do you want me to stop?”

“No!”

“Then why do you deny me?”

“I don’t, I just... I’m not. Can we just turn off the lights?!” she demanded.

“No.”

“Why not? I want the lights off.”

“Are you ashamed of me? You wish to not have to see me?” he asked.

“Oh, my God, no! I’m ashamed of me!”

Krynch smiled and something akin to mischief played through his expression. “You have no reason to be ashamed. Unless of course, you are ashamed of the effect you have on me.” He went up on his knees allowing her to see his engorged erection.

Her eyes rounded as she looked at him. He was as long, if not slightly longer, than any man she’d ever seen in any of the movies she’d been brave enough to watch online, and almost twice as thick. But what interested her most was the myriad of raised bumps placed along his crown and shaft. She reached out to touch it, but stopped herself, looking up to silently ask permission.

Krynch took her hand in his and brought it to his swollen member, pressing her fingers into his throbbing cock as he pressed into her hand, then allowed his own hand to drop to his side to see what she’d do.

Grace’s fingers traced the underside of his length, then encircled his shaft, squeezing gently before running back up the top of his shaft before stopping just before the base. There

was a rough spot there, just above his cock, and when her fingers explored the area, the more she rubbed it, the more prominent it became, actually swelling into a firm, slightly rounded area that she could only guess at its purpose.

“I... what does... is that for what I think it’s for?” she asked, dragging her thumb along its surface as her other hand stroked his length, and her belly did flips at the thought of what she might soon be experiencing.

“I will show you what it does. If it would please you,” Krynch said, still wearing that damn mischievous grin.

“Oh, I’m betting on it pleasing me,” she said, nodding for effect.

Without warning, and contrary to all his slow and measured movements, Krynch grabbed her legs just behind her knees, one hand on the underneath of each and raised them high into the air.

Grace screeched as she was yanked off the pillow and slid down closer to where he was still on his knees, now looking intently at the place he’d discovered between her legs.

“Do not move,” he ordered calmly as he leaned her ass against his upper thighs to keep her in place. Krynch didn’t look up at her again. Instead he explored her. His fingers traced the edges of the tiny pink panties she still wore, just sneaking under the edge. He took hold of the top of her panties and tugged them until they were snugly against her, clearly outlining her puffy, aroused labia. As he held them against her, he used the fingers of his other hand to stroke up and down the slit they clearly displayed as the fabric stretched between her lips.

Grace watched him as best she could while lying on her back with her lower half up in the air as he examined her anatomy.

He petted her, stroked her, tugging her panties this way and that to better see the flesh that hid just out of sight beneath the thin satin fabric.

Grace panted, her body already primed and ready for him, her inner muscles clenching at nothing at all and yet everything she hoped to experience with every touch of his hands. Growing impatient for more, she did her best to wait for him to get his fill and move on to the next activity, which she hoped included a whole lot more action and penetration and a whole lot less examination. But whether it could be blamed on her earlier consumption of multiple bottles of wine, or her naturally impatient nature, she wasn't capable of waiting very long. "Are we going to do this?!" she finally blurted out.

His gaze raised to hers.

"I'm sorry, I just... good Lord, please! Get on with it!" she exclaimed.

Krynch lifted a hand so she could see it and from its index finger sprouted a razor sharp claw.

"Oh, shit," she murmured.

Krynch reached down while holding her gaze and slid his claw under the edge of her panties, then with one smooth motion, sliced them right off her body. He lifted them, dangling from that same claw, from where they now lay draped over her hip and flung them aside. He returned his hands to the underneath of her knees and forced her knees back toward her chest.

"Krynch," she said, as he inched up as close to her ass as he could get without literally crawling on top of her.

Krynch shimmied his hips enough to adjust his position so that his cock lined up with the slit he'd been contentedly exploring before she'd let him know how badly she wanted him inside her. He let go of one of her knees and pressed down on his cock with that hand so that its head began to test the glistening entrance that didn't seem to be sure if it wanted to welcome him inside, or push him away.

"Krynch, is this going to work?" Grace asked, now a little concerned after seeing how much larger he'd swelled to while playing with her.

“I have no doubts,” he said as he pressed down one more time and thrust his hips.

Grace gasped sharply as he spread her legs even wider and began working himself in and out of her pussy. She watched him with her lips forming a perfect ‘O’, though no sound escaped her.

Krynch wanted to appear to Grace that he was still in control as he worked his hips, his cock pulling almost out of her body, then sliding back into its depths, each time eliciting a moan from her, but he was far from in control. He was as aroused as she was. His body was humming like a magnet, the need to mate her and make her irreversibly his riding him hard. He looked down at her face and couldn’t help a slight swell of self-satisfaction as he watched her body’s reaction to the pleasure he was giving her. He well knew from the reactions of more than a few females the sensations the unique anatomy of his cock could cause.

Grace began to whimper, her body reaching its peak shortly after he’d pushed inside her, and he sent up a quick prayer of thanks. He’d wanted to mark her body with his release the moment he’d shoved himself inside her. This would not be his proudest moment as a lover, but it didn’t seem that Grace would mind too much.

“Krynch,” Grace whispered as she opened her eyes and reached for him.

Krynch, who’d been on his knees pistoning in and out of her channel leaned forward, catching himself on his hands as he nudged himself closer and began to rock his hips against hers, changing the angle of his cock inside her. He felt his pleasure node harden and extend even further as he ground it into her clit.

Grace cried out and held tight to him as he gave her sensations unlike any she’d ever experienced, and right away started rolling her hips in conjunction with his.

“Krynch,” she whispered.

“Let it happen,” he said, his voice gruff and harsh.

“Oh, my, God,” she managed as she lost herself in the raised bumps on his cock, and the node just above its base. Her eyes rolled back and her back arched as she extended her neck and her nipples hardened to sharp, hard peaks.

Krynch lifted himself just enough to increase his speed, yet not change the angle of penetration and rode her to completion, with her screaming her pleasure at the final moment. As she tumbled over that line between reality and dream state, he clenched his jaws and kept pumping his cock into her, filling her with every ounce of his essence. Every single bit of satisfaction. All that he had to give was rushing into her body, into her womb, into her very being, giving her his scent, gifting her all that he was, changing who they both were, and making her his.

Minutes later they finally began to stir.

Krynch lifted himself up off her body and collapsed beside her, slipping an arm beneath her shoulders and upper back to pull her toward him, then pulling the blankets up over them. Once she was again resting on his chest, he closed his eyes and allowed himself a moment to catch his breath.

Grace gradually returned to her senses and curled into his body.

“Are you well?” he asked.

“Never better,” she murmured.

“I apologize for the brevity of our relations. I was extremely aroused. Next time I will be a better lover.”

Grace’s eyes popped open though she didn’t lift her head from his chest. “I’m not sure I could survive any better,” she said, as she giggled a little before relaxing against him again.

Krynch smiled to himself as he stroked her back, wondering if perhaps he should have told her prior to claiming her what it meant, and how her life would change. Ultimately deciding that it didn’t matter because he’d have taken the same course regardless, he settled in beside her and fell asleep, his soul whole for the first time in his life. His mate was found. His mate was claimed. His essence implanted inside her to

lock her to him forever. There was nothing else he'd need —
ever.

Chapter 9

Krynch awoke sometime later with an angry Satan Claws standing on his chest, looking him in the face. Krynch opened his eyes and glared at the cat. “What do you want?” he asked softly so as not to wake Grace.

Satan Claws turned and walked down the length of his body, pausing at the foot of the bed to look back at him.

Krynch pulled Grace closer and settled in to rest a little longer, which caused Satan Claws to march right back up his body and bat his paw at Krynch’s face while emitting a low growl.

Krynch pushed the cat away, not wanting to harm Grace’s beast, but not willing to put up with its antics either.

Satan Claws caught Krynch’s finger in his mouth and started backing up, pulling Krynch toward the foot of the bed.

Intrigued, Krynch sat up, which had Satan Claws excitedly jump down off the bed, then pause at the doorway and meow at him. “What are you trying to tell me?” Krynch asked, getting out of bed and following the cat silently down the hallway. He followed Satan Claws into the living room where the cat jumped up onto the window seat and slipped between the blinds and the window itself. Krynch went to the opposite end of the window and just barely moved the edge of the blinds to see out of the window.

A small male stood beside one of Grace’s trees, looking up into its branches. The male looked up at the house, then the tree he stood beside again and leapt from the ground to the lowest branches. He pulled himself up into the tree, pausing every couple of seconds to look back at the house. It was

obvious to Krynch that this male had recognized the safety lasers placed over Grace's home and decided to take advantage of the fact that he knew the location of the tracker sent after him, rather than wait for the tracker to find him. He was looking either for a way in, or for an opportune place to lie in wait for Krynch to walk unsuspectingly into the yard.

Krynch looked down at his wrist and activated the transport feature on his communicator, taking himself from Grace's living room to almost the very top of the tree his third and final target was now climbing up. He materialized less than a foot away from the male and waited for him to reach up to the next limb to discover him waiting there.

The male looked over his shoulder at the house once more, then turned to look up into the tree branches above his head. His eyes met Krynch's and he shrieked his surprise, letting go of the branches he was currently standing on and holding onto and beginning to fall backward.

Krynch reached out with his lightning fast reflexes and grabbed the male's arm, keeping him from falling.

"Release me!" the male demanded.

Krynch, who was in an uncharacteristically good mood, shrugged. "Very well." He released his hold on the male, allowing him to fall twenty feet below to land in the snowdrift beneath the tree. Before the male even hit the ground, Krynch had transported himself to the ground. As the male hit and his breath was knocked out of him, Krynch activated his communicator, which enclosed the fugitive in a plasma encasement, melting the snow where he lay, but also rendering him unable to move.

Krynch smiled menacingly at the male as he transported them both to his ship. He secured the male in a plasma enforced holding cell, made sure the other two fugitives were still secure with the plasma encased cells intact, then went to his quarters for clothing before returning to Grace's home. Rather than materialize outside her home, this time he simply transported himself directly into her living room.

Satan Claws hopped down from his window seat and strolled over, winding himself in and out of Krynch's ankles.

"You have done well, beastie," Krynch said, stroking the cat's head as he'd seen Grace do.

Satan Claws wandered away in the direction of the kitchen, and Krynch followed. Satan Claws pawed at a cabinet and looked at Krynch. Krynch opened the cabinet and laughed. "Food. You want to be fed. Very well, you have earned it." He took the time to feed the cat, then left the cat to his dinner when he went the other way, to Grace's bedroom.

He quietly gathered his clothing and his boots, dropping one of his boots as he did so.

The sound of the boot hitting the floor woke Grace. She rolled over and looked at him through bleary eyes. "What are you doing?"

"I am gathering my clothes. It is time to leave."

Grace watched him without a word for only a few moments more, then she turned her back on him, pulling her blankets up around her chin and hiding her face in her pillow.

"I have things that require my attention. They must be seen to before I can consider anything else."

"Doesn't matter," she muttered from the depths of her pillow where she had her face pressed into it.

"Grace, turn to me so that I can explain. My time here is limited."

"Just go, Krynch. And at least have the decency to not pretend like the others do. I don't need your false promises. I can do just fine on my own. It's always just me when the sun comes up anyway. Just go."

"Grace, I will be back. You are my female! I will not leave you behind, but I must see to my other obligations first."

"Yeah, okay. Just go."

"Grace, things have changed and you do not understand. This is my fault for not explaining the situation before..."

“Krynch?” she asked, interrupting him.

“Yes?”

“Please go. This is only making it worse.”

“I will return as soon as I can.”

The sound of a low hum interrupted his attempts to explain what had taken place between them. He looked down at his communicator which indicated a drain on the power supply of his ship. He knew at once the three fugitives were attempting to break through the plasma encasements on their cells. “I must go, Grace. I will return! I give you my word!” he shouted as he dematerialized and transported out of her bedroom and directly to his ship.

Grace lay in her bed, her covers obscuring the fact that she was even there as she didn’t even try to hide the tears.

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“Are you sure you won’t be coming down to have Christmas dinner with us tomorrow?”

“No, thank you, Bethany. I’m just going to stay home and see what I can find to do around here.”

“I really don’t want you staying home alone all day.”

“It’ll be fine.”

“Have you heard from Edward since he tried to break into your house?”

“Not a word.”

Bethany laughed. “He’s insisting that he was only trying make sure that you were okay after you seemed so upset the party.”

“Yeah, which is why he came in the middle of the night and tried to break in without me knowing it.”

“Oh, I know. He’s a lying Rat-bastard.”

“Been telling you he’s worse than you think he is. Worse than I ever thought.”

“He keeps telling everybody that you had your boyfriend attack him and he’s considering pressing charges.”

“Just like I told you before, tell him if he tries that I’ll press charges against him for breaking and entering.”

“I did! He gets all in a huff and makes an excuse to leave.”

“You saw the photos of the broken glass I took before I had it repaired.”

“I did! Call the police, Grace. File a report at the very least. You should have done that right away.”

Grace sighed. “I know I should have, but I knew that I’d have to be involved with him to file charges, then go to court, get a restraining order and on and on and on. I don’t want to have to deal with him. I just want to forget it.”

“What are you going to do if he comes back?”

“I’ll call the police, then.”

“He could really hurt you.”

“I don’t think he’s brave enough to come back here. He knows that I could accuse him of breaking in and he doesn’t want to have to deal with that.”

“Well, if he comes back, you call 911 and then you call me. We’re coming immediately. You can’t take a chance on crazy people like that.”

“He hasn’t been back, and it’s been a week, so I’m pretty sure he’s not going to try again. Whoever he ran into after he left here spooked him.”

“It was your boyfriend!” Bethany said, laughing. “The big one, dressed like a Grinch!” she finished laughing even

harder.

“I keep telling you I don’t have a boyfriend. Edward broke in, and when I caught him opening the door, he ran. He heard me on the phone pretending to call emergency services.”

“Well somebody did a number on him. He had his butt handed to him,” Bethany said, still laughing. “He even went so far as to claim the guy that attacked him was green and had pointed teeth. He was not happy when I explained that green makeup and plastic pointed teeth were available everywhere online. The Grinch is a very popular costume.”

Grace made herself laugh, though the description of Krynch hurt her heart. “The only truth is that he broke into my home. It was the middle of the night and I happened to be awake, thank God. And he didn’t even tell you that part. He said I welcomed him inside and some supposed Grinch costumed man attacked him. The only thing that I saw attack him was Satan Claws. You saw the bites on his face.”

“I did! I’m thinking Satan Claws the Murder Floof is a more appropriate name for that cat of yours than I realized. I’m glad you had him to protect you.”

“Me, too. When Edward left he didn’t have broken bones that I’m aware of. I mean, when Satan Claws was attached to his face, he did stumble and fall into the cabinets and stuff a couple of times. I suppose he could have broken something, but I was more worried about making sure he didn’t hurt my kitty or me. I didn’t really pay too much attention to him other than screaming that he needed to get out.” Grace felt a slight twinge of guilt lying to Bethany about what happened, but knew it was for the best. There was no alternative. What would she say anyway? ‘Oh, by the way, I met a green alien and actually he was the one who attacked Edward, but don’t worry, he’s gone, even the aliens don’t want me.’ No. Just no. A little white lie was better for all involved.

“I’m so glad you weren’t hurt.”

“Me, too. The one I really feel sorry for is his baby-mama. Hopefully she wakes up and sees him for who he is

before he ruins her life, too. I think he's actually losing his mind now. Big green aliens... He's losing it, Bethany."

"I agree."

After a slight pause in the conversation, Bethany tried once more. "You're sure you don't want to come eat with us?"

"I'm sure."

"Okay. If you change your mind, we'll be here. If you don't change your mind, I'll bring you a plate in the afternoon."

"Thank you, Bethany."

"You're welcome. I'll see you later. Merry Christmas."

"You, too," Grace said, unable to even say the words.

Grace pressed end on her phone and looked at the glass of wine she'd only taken a sip of since sitting down. She didn't want it. She looked at the clock on the wall and saw that it was just after 9:30 P. M. "It's going to be an early night, Satan Claws. Let's go take a bath," she said.

Satan Claws looked up at her, then stood, stretching his long body as he prepared to jump down.

Grace walked over and petted his long fur before turning off the single strand of white Christmas lights. "Well, that's it, Satan Claws. I don't think anyone would mind if we turn off the lights on Christmas Eve instead of waiting until tomorrow. And for the record, I think this will be the last Christmas lights we ever put up," she said.

Satan Claws jumped off the window seat and followed her around the house as she double checked the locks on the windows and doors, then headed into her bathroom to run herself a hot, steamy bubble-bath.

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Krynch watched as Flog's men led the three fugitives away in plasma cuffs and shackles. "You should be sure to encase their cells in plasma also."

"It's being seen to as we speak."

A soft ping on his communicator let him know the credits Flog had promised to pay him had arrived in his account. He swiped the screen of the communicator and glanced at the confirmation message just to be sure the total amount was correct. "It's been a pleasure," he said as he prepared to take his leave.

"I must thank you, Krynch. I know it is a business matter, but you always keep your word. In this instance in particular your ability to remain undetected was greatly appreciated. You have saved my reputation and most likely my position."

"Just did my job," Krynch said. "Be well, Flog." Krynch turned and walked away, making the short walk to his ship that was sitting less than forty feet behind him.

"If I am ever able to be of service, Krynch, call on me," Flog called out.

Krynch turned halfway and gave a wave, then stopped and looked up at the lights highlighting the perimeter of the flight deck they stood on. The lights were multi-colored, set in a pattern from lightest to darkest, and they lit up in sequence before dimming and waiting their turn to flash again. "Now that you mention it..."

Flog looked behind himself, and unable to determine what it was that Krynch had focused on, he turned back to Krynch. "What? What is it that you want?"

"Do you have spare lights like those flashing on the perimeter of your deck?"

"You want safety lights?" Flog asked confusedly.

"Yes. A lot of them."

Flog was obviously surprised by the request. Finally, he shrugged. “Fine. I keep more replacements on hand than we could ever use. They’re stored on the maintenance deck. I’ll take you there. Take what you like.”



Krynch stood back and looked around the small galley of his ship. It was flashing and sparkling unlike any Christmas decoration he’d seen while on Earth. He’d installed the flashing lights Flog had given him in every single room on his ship and in each corridor. They lined the walls, accented the outer edges of stainless steel counter tops, framed doorways, and tracked the lines of where the walls met the ceilings on the perimeter of every surface he could find to adhere them to, being careful to keep them within the color patterns from lighter to darker. According to Flog they’d flash lighter to darker no matter how you aligned them, so it was important to keep them in lighter to darker progressions so that they didn’t look like a mess of senseless flashes.

Krynch left the galley and walked the corridors, stopping in his personal quarters, his attention on the lights. It was good. But it wasn’t enough. The problem was he didn’t know exactly how to decorate for the celebration that humans called Christmas. Lots of colorful lights was the only thing he’d really noticed while on the planet. “I need more!” he growled, striding purposefully toward his command deck. Yanking the small swinging arm his keyboard was attached toward him as he flopped into his command chair, he began typing. ‘Christmas on Earth’.

Immediately his screen began to fill with image after image of bright, colorful lights. Lights draped on houses. Lights on power poles. Lighted displays in the yards of homes. And lights on trees.

Krynch tilted his head sideways as he tried to get a better look at the lighted trees. Tapping on that particular photo repeatedly the image enlarged on his viewing screen until it blocked out all the other images. It was then that he realized that not all that sparkled on the tree were lights. It was adorned with decorated orbs and ornaments of different shapes and sizes. They seemed to be glass and metallic, sparkling and reflecting the lights around them. There were also bows and strands of gold and silver strung between the ornaments on the tree.

“I need these. And a tree,” he muttered as he started typing commands into his main frame computer. Krynch stopped typing and looked up as his mind began to picture it. “I need more than one. I need three at least, for each room,” he decided, typing commands in quickly for his onboard replicator to recreate from the images he was feeding it. Once his commands were complete, he looked closer at the photo, and realized he did not tell the replicator to make the beautiful boxes beneath the tree.

‘What are the packages beneath a human Christmas tree made of?’ he typed in.

Getting his answer he sat back, surprised. “Gifts. What kind of gifts?” he asked. After a little more investigating he was truly perturbed. “I’m supposed to give her something she wants. I don’t know what she wants,” he said as he tried to think of anything he could offer her that she might want. Then he remembered, she’d told him what she wanted. She’d told him exactly what she’d wanted. And he would have no problem at all giving it to her.

Satisfied that he’d completed his task he grasped the edge of his keyboard, planning to push it to its resting position beside his chair, but then he realized that he’d not quite finished. “Satan Claws,” he muttered as he typed in a few more commands. Now truly finished, he double-checked his auto-pilot trajectory, and satisfied that all was as it should be, he left the command deck to go to the supply room. It housed the replicators he depended on for whatever he needed. It should have by now completed the replication of the

Christmas trees he'd programmed in and begun working on the rest of his requirements. His plan completed and in motion, he had a lot of work to do and no time to waste.



## Chapter 10

Grace woke disoriented and startled to a steady knocking on her door just before dawn. She forced herself up and looked blearily around her bedroom. “Why?” she asked the stillness around her. Then, like a gift from above, the knocking stopped. Smiling, she settled back in for a little more sleep. But just as suddenly as the knocking stopped, it started up again. Sitting up once more, she scowled as she kicked away the covers before getting out of bed and wiping the back of her hand across her mouth. She drooled sometimes when she was sleeping, most people did at one point or another. Sighing, she took a couple of steps toward her bedroom door, then realized that it might be Edward that was knocking. Turning back for her phone, she grabbed it and made her way toward the living room as quietly as she could.

Coming to a stop just inside the living room, still listening to the knocking, she figured out that it wasn't coming from her front door, and instead was coming from the kitchen door. The door that was partially hidden from the street. The door that Edward had already broken into once. She hurriedly went to the kitchen door and stood to its side so that no matter who it was, they couldn't see her shadow on the thin curtains covering the glass panels in the upper half of the door.

Grace looked around for Satan Claws, knowing that he'd attacked Edward before, and hoping if it came to it he'd protect her again. But Satan Claws sat a few feet away from her lazily cleaning his paws. “Don't you want to protect me again?”

Satan Claws looked up at her, then laid down, stretching his body to its fullest length as he started purring.

“Great. Thanks. Appreciate it.”

The knocking that had before seemed patient, increased in speed and seemed to be a little more insistent.

“He is not going to go away,” Grace told Satan Claws. Shaking her head at his complete disinterest, she sidled up closer to the door, holding her phone at the ready. “I’ve already dialed 9 and 1. All I have to do is hit another 1 and the police are coming! Go away, Edward!” she shouted.

“What is 9 and 1? Is it a code?” the voice responded.

Grace’s brows rose in surprise and she reached out snatching the thin white curtain back to see for herself who was knocking on her door. “Krynch?! I thought you were Edward.”

“I am certainly not Edward.”

“I can see that,” she said, still standing there looking at him through the glass panels in the door.

“Will you allow me to enter, Grace?” he asked.

“Why?”

“Because I wish to speak with you.”

“You are speaking to me.”

“Grace...”

“You left.”

“I am back. I told you I had obligations to take care of and that when my obligations were fulfilled, I’d return. Did you not hear me?”

“I heard you. I just didn’t believe you.”

“Why would you not believe me?”

Grace shrugged. “What were your obligations?”

“I had to return the three fugitives to the custody of those they’d escaped from.”

“I’m guessing it’s not on Earth.”

“No, it is not. Can I enter?” he asked.

“Sure. You don’t need me to open the door. You can zip in and out of here as freely as you please. I’ve seen it.”

“I want your invitation to enter this time.”

Grace lifted a hand and swept it toward the interior of her house.

Krynch rattled the doorknob.

Rolling her eyes, she reached out and unlocked the door, pulling it open for him. “Come in.”

“Thank you.”

“What can I do for you?”

“I have come to wish you a very Happy Christmas, and to celebrate with you.”

“I don’t celebrate anymore.”

“I have gifts for you,” he said as Satan Claws began to weave between his ankles. Krynch looked down at the cat. “I’ve gifts for you, too.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” Grace said.

“Am I too late for the celebration?”

“No. It’s just another day for me.”

“It is not. You spoke of how much you missed the celebrations you once loved. It was clear that your heart missed them. So, I’ve decided that I will give them back to you.”

“It’s not as simple as that. You can’t just say, ‘Here, I’m making you celebrate so you can be happy again.’”

“Perhaps not. But I’ve returned for you, because I care for you. Because I promised that I’d return. Because I wanted to return.”

Grace looked at Krynch. “You didn’t have to.”

“If I did not return, I would have lived out the remainder of my life miserable. Always wanting, never satisfied.” He cast a slightly devious look in her direction. “I may not ever be able to celebrate the Christmas again without heartbreak.”

Grace turned a sarcastic glare his way as she stepped past him and reached for a coffee cup. “You don’t celebrate Christmas at all. You don’t even know what it is.”

“I do now. I have researched it.”

“Why?” she asked exasperatedly, as she poured herself some fresh coffee. “Gotta love programmable coffee pots, am I right?” she asked.

He watched as she added sugar and creamer to her coffee then turned to him, leaning against the cabinet behind her. “What is that?” he asked.

“Coffee. Do you not have coffee?”

“No, I don’t know of it.”

Grace took down another coffee cup and filled it with coffee. “Do you want sugar and creamer?”

“Is that how it’s drunk?”

“You can drink it any way you want it, but I like it best that way.”

“I will try it that way,” he said, intrigued by the aroma filling the kitchen. “Did you make this today?”

“No. It’s programmed to make a fresh pot every morning. I meant to cancel the program last night so I could sleep in. Glad I didn’t now.”

Krynch sipped the steaming liquid, then sipped it again. “I like this. Coffee. Yes?” he asked, sipping it again.

“Yes. And you’re welcome.”

“For what?”

“Introducing you to your new addiction.”

“To coffee?” he asked.

“Yes. Humans can become quite attached to it.”

“I understand that,” he said, turning his cup up and waiting for the last few drops to fall into his mouth.

“You want more?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, reaching for the coffee pot himself and pouring another cup. He spooned six spoons of sugar into his cup and then so much creamer that it looked almost like milk. Sipping his sugar bomb of a coffee he grinned. “I like this coffee very much.”

“Merry Christmas,” she said, walking out of the kitchen to eventually take a seat on her recliner.

“Why do you say Merry Christmas because I like the coffee.”

“Because I gave you a gift. I introduced you to coffee.”

“I understand,” he said with a grin. Then he focused on her as he took a seat on her window seat, with Satan Claws joining him. “Christmas...” he began.

“Yes?” she asked.

“I researched it because I wanted to be able to understand what it was that you were missing,” Krynch explained.

Now that Grace was waking up a little more, and understood that he actually had a reason for leaving her before their night was even over, she was beginning to feel a little less bristly. He didn’t leave her to get away from her, he left to handle his business. “That was very thoughtful of you. I appreciate it. And if I’m being truthful, I’m glad that you’re here. I guess I’m just so used to being disappointed and under-appreciated that I assumed you were just like all the rest.”

“I am not like anyone else that you’ll ever meet again,” he said.

Grace smiled and shook her head. “I have no doubt,” she said, taking in his amber eyes and green skin.

“I wanted to understand Christmas so that I could help make it enjoyable for you again.”

“I don’t understand why it’s such a big deal to you. You just met me.”

“It doesn’t matter if I’ve only known you for a short while or half of my life, you are still my pledge and it is my

honor to give you happiness in any way that I can. It warms my heart and makes me happy when you are happy.”

She thought about his explanation. “What does it mean to be someone’s pledge?”

“It means that I have pledged my life to you. It means that I will never waiver in my devotion to you. I will protect you all the days of our lives. There will never be another.”

“But you just met me,” she said again, her voice getting quieter.

Krynch swallowed the last gulp of his coffee and slid to his knees before her, taking her free hand in his. “I am the same male you wanted when I banished Rat-bastard. I am the same male who loved you six nights ago. I am the same male who will fill your days and nights with love and desire and happiness, if you will have me. This I pledge to you, Grace. Will you pledge to me?”

“But you said that Earth is off limits. Isn’t that how you put it. That your time here was limited. You can’t stay here.”

“I did. And you’re correct. But the answer to that is part of your gift.”

She looked into his face. The same face she was afraid to admit made her very happy. “I thought when you left that I’d never see you again.”

“I know that it is hard for you to put faith in me because you have been disappointed by so many others. But can you try?”

“I’m afraid to,” she answered honestly.

“As you said, I can’t stay here. Earth is not allowed visitors of another planet. Your people aren’t even aware of the species that live on their own moon, or on the nearby planets within their own galaxy. They would panic if they ever saw me.” Krynch raised his eyes to the ceiling to make a point, to indicate he was looking toward the stars, the sky. “But if you’ll come with me, we can be together.”

“Leave Earth forever?”

Krynch nodded. “Will you pledge yourself to me, Grace? You’ve said that you have nothing here but Satan Claws. He will come with us. And you will have us both.”

“How do you know that there will never be another you’ll want more? I could go with you and end up stranded out there,” she said, flinging her arm out to indicate everything around her.

“My kind find their pledge and make their pledge to them for life. Once they’ve found their pledge, they cannot even tolerate another nearby.”

Grace sat quietly, thinking about the emotions he brought out in her. Thinking about how much her heart hurt when he left her. She never felt like that before, not even when Edward had left.

“There’s no doubt a connection that I can’t explain,” she said softly. “But...”

“What reason is there to stay here?” he asked. “Tell me so that I understand why you won’t have me,” he said sadly.

Grace opened her mouth to give him reasons and couldn’t think of a single one. She had no family, no ties to anything or anyone. There was no reason at all that she couldn’t just pick up and leave. “I don’t have a reason to stay here.”

Krynch smiled at her. “Do you remember that you said that you didn’t want to be here anymore. You said you didn’t want to feel the things you were feeling. You didn’t want to think of all the disappointment and pain that had been forced on you. You just wanted to be happy. You wanted to get into your vehicle and drive away into oblivion. Go somewhere you’ll never be recognized. Somewhere you’ll be free to be yourself without everyone watching you waiting for you to fall apart. Do you remember saying those things to me?”

Grace watched him with tears in her eyes as he knelt in front of her and held her hand. “Yes,” she whispered.

“I am giving you exactly that, and more. I am your male, Grace. I am your pledge. I am nothing without you. Please

pledge to me, and we'll go in my vehicle.”

Grace squeezed his hand and looked at him. “I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t hesitant. That I wasn’t thinking ‘what if?’. But, oh my, God, I don’t want you to leave me here again. I never thought that I’d be more lost than after all I’ve been through, but I was. I was so lost when you left. I was bereft! But how is that possible? It makes no sense!”

“It makes perfect sense. We are pledged mates, my Grace. Our souls know it, even if our minds do not. Well, your mind. Mine is well aware,” he teased lightly.

Grace laughed a little and sniffled back her tears. “Are you sure?”

“I have never been more sure of anything in my life.”

She watched Satan Claws rubbing himself around Krynch’s legs. He obviously loved Krynch. And he didn’t love anyone but her until Krynch. “I’ll pledge to you.”

“Yes?!” Krynch asked.

“Yes!” Grace said excitedly. “I have nothing here but Satan Claws and he approves obviously.”

Krynch pulled her into his arms and kissed her. “You will never be sorry,” he promised her.

“Are you sure that you will be happy at my side?” Grace asked.

“I will. I have never wanted anything more. I am concerned, though, that you may have different ideas in mind for our younglings. It will change nothing between us, only that I will have to become more persistent if you don’t want as many as I want.”

Grace sat dumbfounded, looking at him as she tried to make sense of anything he’d just said. “I’m sorry, what?” she finally settled on.

“I wish for four or six. But in my research I have seen that humans prefer smaller batches of younglings.”



“What?” she repeated, seeing things crumbling before they ever got started.

“Younglings, little ones. Humans call them children.”

“Yes, I understand that part. But I can’t give you any. I’m past the time in my life that I can conceive a child. I told you I’m old.”

“You are not old and I will not hear of such nonsense. And you are more than capable of growing younglings.”

“I don’t have eggs anymore. I’m smack dab in the middle of menopause. And if children are so important to you, then maybe you should find a new pledge mate. I can certainly understand the desire for children, but my time for that is past. I can’t give you that.”

Krynych laughed heartily as he placed his hand on her stomach. “You already have. We have younglings growing right here.”

Grace’s mouth fell open and she looked at him in shock.

Krynych smiled. “You forget that I am not human. Your body responds to mine because you are my pledged. They are already here, tucked safely inside you.”

“I’ve got, we’re going to have...” she stopped and covered his hand with hers. “They’re already here?” she asked on a whisper.

“Yes. There are two now. I will want at least four. Maybe six.”

“I’m a mommy,” she said, her voice full of wonder.

“And a pledged mate. And a loved and treasured soul.”

“Krynych!” she exclaimed, throwing herself into his arms.

“Are you happy?” he asked her as he smoothed her beautiful silver hair.

“Yes! Best Christmas ever,” she said through tears of happiness.

“Merry Christmas, my Grace.”

“Merry Christmas, Krynch.”

“Are we ready? Can we go now?” he asked. “The sun is rising and I want to start our adventures.”

“Yes. Yes, we can go. I just need my clothes and food for Satan Claws.”

“Let us gather them. But you need no food for Satan Claws. That is his Christmas gift from me — many cans of fish.”

Grace laughed. “I’ll just get some of my favorite things,” she said, grabbing a garbage bag from under the cabinet and rushing toward her bedroom. She stuffed her favorite outfits, nightgowns, underwear, and shoes into the garbage bag, then handed it to Krynch and hurried to get another. She stuffed her toiletries and accessories into it, more clothing on top and gave it to Krynch as well, who used his communicator to transport them up to his waiting ship.

“Is there somewhere that I can get more shampoo or toothpaste when I need it?” Grace asked, still thinking like a human.

“Yes. There are certain channels available to both send and receive things from Earth. But I also have a replicator. I can simply replicate anything it is that you might wish for.”

“Seriously?” she asked, suddenly even more intrigued.

“Yes,” he said, grinning at her. “We are ready?” he asked.

“Wait! I need my photo albums. The ones that are from my childhood with my parents.” She ran into the living room and grabbed four photo albums out of a corner table and handed them to Krynch.

He transported them up. “Is that everything?” he asked.

“Yes. I think so. Is there anything here that you think I should take?”

“I can either replicate, or purchase anything you need or want.”

“Okay. Let’s go.” She picked up Satan Claws and walked over to stand beside Krynch.

He put his arms around her. “This will take only a moment, then we’ll be on my ship. Are you ready?”

“Yes,” she said, looking around.

“I will make you happy, Grace,” he said, dropping a kiss on her forehead.

“You already have!” she said.

Grace hugged him as he began transporting them to his ship. But they didn’t make it that far. Suddenly they were back, in actuality hadn’t even left.

“We’re still in my living room,” she said.

“Yes, give me one second.” He walked into the kitchen and came back with her coffee maker in his arms.

Grace started laughing. “If you’re going to take that, you’ll need the coffee, too. I’ll get it.”

“When we need more we can replicate it all!” he called out.

She came back into the living room with a shopping bag dangling from her wrist that contained a canister of coffee, a bottle of creamer, and a sugar bowl full of sugar. She rearranged Satan Claws in her arms and snuggled against Krynch’s side as he placed an arm around her.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Ready,” she said.

Seconds later they were standing in the transporter room of Krynch’s ship.

“Oh, Krynch!” she exclaimed when she got her first look at the festively decorated room.

Krynch watched her delightedly as she took in all the Christmas decorations he’d put up for her. “I have decorated every room of the ship. There are trees of every color, lights, sparkling ornaments, bows. And later, I have a Christmas feast

for us to enjoy. I'm not sure what the foods are, but I submitted the recipes from your culture into the replicator. They should be close if not exact."

"I can't believe you did this for me."

"There is nothing I wouldn't do for you. Making your wishes come true, our life, our younglings, and me," he said humbly with a lift of his shoulder, "is my gift to you."

"I don't have a gift for you. Except me, and my promise that I'll always be by your side. I'll always love you, and I'll always be grateful that you saved me."

"It is the only gift I want. Now come, let me show you the rest of the ship."

"Can Satan Claws get down?"

"Yes. I've prepared the ship for his arrival. There is nothing he can damage or that can damage him, and plenty of furred balls to chase," Krynych said as he tossed a furry ball out of the room.

"I wouldn't be too sure about that," Grace said as she put him down and watched him dart away to investigate.

Krynych took Grace's hand in his and led her out of the transport room and into the corridor, where she laughed and exclaimed over all the decorations. With each room she entered her happiness grew and her excitement over their future intensified.

As they entered the galley, which was the center point of all his decorations, she turned to him. "You did all this for me. No one has ever done anything like this for me."

"No one has ever loved you like I do. And you'll never have to know what it's like to be without love again."

"This is the best Christmas ever. The most fantastic gift ever."

"Are you sure? I thought that you did not like Christmas," he teased.

“You’ve saved it. You saved me. You’ve given me a whole new life, and I love Christmas again. You saved Christmas! I cannot believe How My Krynch Saved Christmas!”

Just one more little peek...

Four months later on Earth, on a very quiet Sunday morning.

“Get the door!” Edward yelled from his place on the sofa.

“I’m sick!” his wife managed to get out between heaves. She was leaning over the toilet doing her best to not pass out between bouts of morning sickness.

“Great. Perfect. You’re always using that excuse to get out of something!” he snapped as he slammed his coffee cup down on the table and stood to move toward the door. “Thought you wanted to be a mother! Be a damn mother and stop expecting me to take care of the kid and answer the door and try to fit in my coffee, too! Do your part!” he shouted with every step toward the front door.

The knocking became more and more insistent with every step.

Finally reaching the door, Edward unlocked it and yanked it open. “What?!” he shouted angrily at the two men dressed in suits, standing in his doorway looking at him expectantly. “Edward Vining?”

“Who wants to know?” he snapped.

Simultaneously the two men held up badges to identify themselves as detectives.

“Yeah, I’m Edward. What of it?”

The larger of the detectives reached out and grabbed Edward’s arm, twisting and spinning Edward while driving him to the floor while the other announced that they had a warrant for his arrest and search warrants for the home, and started reading him his Miranda rights. The larger detective cuffed him and shouted orders to him as he floundered on the floor face down.

Five more officers, all uniformed, swarmed the door, each moving efficiently toward a different area of the home.

A social worker entered the house after the officers, going straight to the living room and talking to the little girl seated on the floor eating dry cereal from a box.

“You can’t do this! I’ll have your jobs! I’ll sue every single one of you along with your department! Release me at once!” he shouted.

“Your rights are being read to you. If you choose not to listen to them to find out what you’re being arrested for, that is your choice.”

“You haven’t read shit! You didn’t read me my rights!”

“Yes, sir, we did. And I’ve got it all right here on video,” the officer who’d been reading his rights said, walking around to a place that allowed Edward to see him.

“This is bullshit! I haven’t done anything!”

“Just to humor you and anyone else who sees the first video, I’ll do it all over again. You are under arrest for the murder of Grace Vining. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to legal representation. If you cannot afford legal representation, it will be provided for you...”

As Edward’s Miranda rights were read for the second time, he continued to object and threaten the officers.

“Hi, sweetheart. Where’s your mommy?” the social worker asked.

The little girl pointed toward a bedroom.

“Will you take me to see her?”

The little girl nodded and took the social worker’s extended hand, leading her into the bedroom, then to the bathroom door. The social worker listened for a few seconds and clearly heard the woman vomiting on the other side of the door. She waited until there was a break in the sounds of the woman being sick and called out to her. “Ma’am, my name is Ms. Cox. I’ve been assigned to your case by the state. Can you come out so we can talk?”

“What?” the woman asked shakily.

The doorknob turned and a very pale, very sweaty, very pregnant woman opened the door with a frightened look on her face.

“Are you alright?” the social worker asked.

“Very bad morning sickness,” the woman said weakly.

“What happened to your face?” the social worker asked.

The woman raised a hand and gingerly touched her bruised cheek. The one her husband had struck when she asked whose perfume he smelled like when he came home late earlier that week.

“You have no reason to fear me. I’m here to make things easier for you and your daughter. I asked her to bring me to you so she doesn’t see what’s happening in the living room.”

The woman held out her hand toward her daughter and the little girl went to stand beside her mother.

“What is happening?” the woman asked.

“Your husband is being arrested.”

“For what?” she asked.

“Do you know Grace Vining?”

The woman’s face fell. “Yes. She’s his ex-wife.”

“She’s missing. We found blood stains in her home. And broken glass in your husband’s vehicle with her blood on it.”



The woman's eyes widened and filled with tears. "You think he did it?" she asked.

"There's enough evidence for an arrest warrant."

The woman slid down the door jamb and sat on the floor with her daughter leaning against her.

"Are you alright, ma'am? Can I call someone for you?"

The woman looked up at the social worker with tears in her eyes and a completely unexpected expression — relief. She shook her head. "No. I'm okay. We'll be just fine now."

~ ~ ~

"Bethany, honey?!" Michael shouted.

"I'm in here!" Bethany answered.

"There you are," her husband said, finding her in their kitchen. "Smells good!"

"Cheesy potato bake in the oven, and I'm putting the steaks on the grill in just a second."

"I got some news today," Michael said.

"Oh, yeah? Me, too. What's your news?" Bethany asked.

"Edward was arrested."

"What?! For what?!" Bethany exclaimed.

"They're saying Grace's disappearance is his doing."

"They think he killed her?" Bethany asked, her face not quite as worried as her husband thought it would be.

"I heard they found broken glass in his vehicle with her blood on it."

"Oh, no," Bethany said, sitting on one of the barstools she always pulled around to the oven side of the kitchen island

when she was cooking.

“I thought you’d be more emotional than that,” Michael said.

“I just feel so many things. I miss my friend, but I also feel bad for Edward’s wife. I mean, what’s she going to do now?”

“My friend from down at the station says she had bruises on her face and on her forearm. He said he read the report and she actually showed visible signs of relief when Edward was arrested. I’m pretty sure he was abusing her. The police know for a fact from the surveillance they’ve had him under that he was having affairs with two other women.”

“Poor girl,” Bethany said.

“Looks like they’re going to try to put him away for a long time.”

“Do you think they’ll be successful?”

“I hear there’s a lot of questions, but enough proof to warrant an arrest. I think if he gets a good defense attorney they might be able to create a doubt. It’s enough to get him off.”

“How?”

“Well, they found broken glass with Grace’s blood on it. But there’s no window in her house that’s broken.”

“I told you she said that she’d repaired the window in the kitchen door he broke when he broke into her house.”

“Yeah, and I’m sure they’re going to say she was around long enough to repair the glass, so how did the glass with her blood on it get into his car and his home? So there’s that doubt anyway.”

“What if they never find a body? Will they still try to find him guilty with the doubts and no body?”

“It’d be tough, but sometimes there’s enough evidence. More likely they’ll just make his life a living hell for a while.

Make him dread every single day and have no way to fix it other than just to wait it out.”

“He deserves it. He’s a narcissist, and an abuser of women. I told Grace to be careful. I wish I could have done more.”

“You told the police about him breaking into her home. What else could you have done if she wasn’t willing to do so herself?”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Bethany said.

“So, what’s your news?” he asked.

“Hmm?”

“You said you had news, too,” Michael said.

“Did I? I can’t remember what it was now. Must not have been too exciting.”

Michael chuckled. “It’ll come to you if it’s important enough,” he said, as he kissed her temple. “I’m going to get cleaned up for dinner. Need any help before I get in the shower?”

“No, thank you. I’m good. Going to make a salad to go with the steaks and potato bake. When you get out it’ll be ready.”

“Can’t wait,” Michael said, leaving Bethany in the kitchen when he went to take his shower.

Bethany waited until she heard the shower turn on, then she pulled a folded postcard out of her back pocket and looked down at it. For the dozenth time she checked it for postmarks, stamps, anything at all to indicate where it came from, but there was nothing. Deciding that wasn’t as important as the message it brought, she focused on the photo on the front of the card. She looked at Grace’s radiant smile as the large green male behind her spread his huge hands protectively over Grace’s swollen belly and gave the camera a huge, somewhat alarming smile as he showed all his pointed teeth, and Satan Claws glared up at him. They were standing in front of no less than half-a-dozen Christmas trees, and the room they were in

was filled with bright lights and decorations. Bethany turned the card over and traced the words written in a flowing script. “It’s always Christmastime here!”

Smiling to herself Bethany went over to the sliding glass door and opened it, then walked out into the back yard. She lifted the top of the barbecue grill and dropped the card down through the grate and into the flames licking up from the glowing charcoal beneath it. Bethany watched as the card curled in on itself and then turned to ash just like the newspaper she’d used to start the charcoal. Grinning to herself, happy with her decision to keep Grace’s small bit of contact to herself and let all the pieces here on Earth fall where they may — she went back inside to finish making the salad and take the steaks out of the marinade.

No reason to tell anyone. No one would be harmed too much from not knowing, and no one would believe her anyway.



Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays to all who read this. If you enjoyed it, I hope you’ll give my other works a chance.

They’re listed on the following pages.



How My Krynch Saved Christmas is my contribution to a trio of fun, short, SciFi Romance, Otherworldly Christmas

reads. They do not need to be read in order, and can be read alone. Please consider the other two in the collection.

They are;

Liz Paffel's How My Alien Saved Christmas

and

Rena Marks' How My Jingleballs Saved Christmas.

## From The Author

Thank you for purchasing this book. I hope that my stories make you smile and give you a small escape from the daily same ole/same ole. I write for me, simply for the joy of it, but if someone else smiles as a result of my stories, even better. Your support is greatly appreciated. If you liked this story, please remember to leave a review wherever you bought it, so that more people can find my books. Each review is important, no matter how short or long it may be.

See you in the pages of the next one!

Sandra R Neeley

Other books by this author:

### **Avaleigh's Boys series**

I'm Not A Dragon's Mate!, Book 1

Bane's Heart, Book 2

Kaid's Queen, Book 3

Maverik's Ashes, Book 4

Bam's Ever, Book 5

Vince's Place, Book 6

Destinations, An Avaleigh's Boys Legacy Novella

**Whispers From the Bayou series**

Carnage, Book 1

Destroy, Book 2

Enthrall, Book 3

Lore, Book 4

Murder, Book 5

Aubreigne, Book 6

Whispers of Christmas, Book 7

Lily's Dragon, Book 8

**Haven series**

Haven 1: Ascend

Haven 2: Redemption

Haven 3: Transcend

Haven 4: AVOW

Haven 5: Bonded

Haven 6: Reclaimed

**Riley's Pride**

Riley's Pride, Book 1

Richie's Promise, Book 2

Travis's Gift, Book 3

Roman's Vow, Book 4

Lazarus's Savior, Book 5

Lucas's Prey, Book 6



## **Variant**

Beginnings, Variant 1

Valor, Variant 2

Sin, Variant 3

Two, Variant 4

Brutal, Variant 5

Steel, Variant 6

## **Roar**

Vance, Book 1

Jack, Book 2

## **Orcs of Clan Cumhdach**

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Blessed Curse

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## **Short Stories and Novellas**

CAT

Only Fools Walk Free

Safe On Base: A Howls Romance (loosely connected to Riley's Pride series)

Halloween Treats, An Avaleigh's Boys Novella

## **Co-Written Series/Collections**

Revelations, Book 1, The Order (written with Chris Storm)

Leo's Captive, Book 5, Astrological Mates Collection

Sheltered by the Orc, Monster Brides Collection

## About The Author

Hi, I'm Sandra R Neeley, and I'm an International Best-Selling Author of Paranormal, SciFi, and Fantasy Romances. I'm 58 and married, with two children, two grandchildren, a multitude of pets, and I'm a Self-Published Author. At a very young age I recognized that the stories and fictional characters living in my head were not something everyone understood. But after deciding to craft them into books, surprisingly, people have loved them. Every story will leave you feeling like you've been visiting with a long-lost loved one during a respite from reality. Every story ends in a happily ever after, but a bit of a warning; there are some 'triggers' in my stories that certain people should avoid, so please read the synopses and warnings supplied with each book before buying.

I've got multiple series published at this time. Avaleigh's Boys, Riley's Pride, and Roar are all Paranormal Shifter Romances. Whispers From the Bayou and The Orcs of Clan Cumhdach are Fantasy Paranormal Romance, Haven is SciFi Romance, Variant is a dark genetic manipulation romance with military overtones. In addition, I've collaborated on several projects and collections, and published a couple of standalone novels, and several short stories. I've even got a few stories under pen names you might find here and there. There's always something new rolling around in my head, and so much more to come. I'm always glad to hear from my readers, so feel free to look me up and say hello. My website is [www.sneeleywrites.com](http://www.sneeleywrites.com), where I post snippets of works in progress, and all my links for books and social media can be found there as well.

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