



Sweet Holiday Surprise

❁ SERIOUSLY SWEET ST. LOUIS ❁

CINDY KIRK

SWEET HOLIDAY SURPRISE

CINDY KIRK



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CHAPTER ONE

“Today’s the day, Raven.” Grace lifted her fork and pointed it at her sister-in-law. “You’ve been dancing around this for months. For goodness sakes, ask the guy out already.”

“It isn’t that easy,” Raven protested, though the words sounded weak even to her own ears. “His coffee shop is busy, and there’re always people around.”

“You’re in there often enough.” Grace kept the fork pointed. “There’s got to be a time when you can pull him aside and ask.”

Raven hesitated. Normally, she liked for the guy to make the first move, and then she most eagerly complied. Being kept waiting was a new experience. One she didn’t much care for.

“Okay. I’ll do it.” Raven pushed the salad around on her plate with her fork and pulled her dark brows together. “I just hope I’m not misreading the signals.”

Raven considered herself an excellent judge of people. She held nothing but admiration for Will Dougan, owner of Dougan’s Coffee Shop, located down the block from her apartment building.

She’d moved into her new place last summer, and since then, she had been to Dougan’s nearly every day. Some days it was just to grab a cup of her favorite eco-friendly Ethiopian blend. Other days, she’d pull out her laptop and work.

Sure, the place could get noisy, but she’d just put in her AirPods and go off into her own world. Her favorite days were when there would be a break in business, and she and Will would talk.

Over the past four months, she’d learned more about him than she had

most of the men she'd dated. The more she learned, the more she liked. Soon, her admiration had sparked into attraction, and then, somewhere between his post-college backpacking trip and his humiliating yet still adorable experience during the eighth-grade talent show, the sparks had turned into a full-blown sizzle.

She was positive—well, 99.9% positive—the attraction went both ways. There was no mistaking the gleam in his eyes whenever his gaze would settle on her. She'd made sure he knew she wasn't dating anyone, yet he still hadn't made a move.

“You should definitely ask him out.”

Raven blinked and refocused on Grace. “What?”

“I want you to ask him out.” Grace hesitated, as if a thought had just struck her. “Unless you think he's got a girlfriend.”

“He doesn't.” Raven shook her head for extra emphasis. “In early October, we had a long talk about previous relationships. He told me he and his girlfriend split last April or May.”

Raven had breathed a sigh of relief at that news. She, too, had been without a significant other in her life for about the same amount of time. Not that she didn't get asked out, she did. But not by anyone who interested her.

“That was almost two months ago. If he's as attractive and as sweet as you say he is, he may have a new girlfriend by now.”

A sinking feeling took up residence in the pit of her stomach as Raven considered the possibility. She shook her head. “He'd have told me.”

She was certain of that.

Relief washed across Grace's face. “Well, okay, good.”

Grace was married to Raven's brother, Nick, and was as down-to-earth as they came. Before Grace, Nick, a prominent pediatric orthopedic surgeon, had dated a variety of women. None had kept his interest for long.

Until Grace. Once Nick had taken the time to get to know this smart and caring nurse, he'd fallen hard.

Before she'd met Will, Raven had been like Nick, moving from one relationship to another, growing quickly bored with each. Though several of the relationships had seemed promising in the beginning, she'd quickly discovered either the man simply wanted someone pretty on his arm, or he didn't possess the strength of character she required.

Her last boyfriend, Stephen, had lasted the longest, and she'd genuinely liked and respected him. That was, until she'd found him in bed with his

administrative assistant, Celine, a woman he'd previously told Raven was "just a friend."

Raven resisted the urge to sigh. She couldn't believe she'd believed his lies and ignored what had been right in front of her.

The alarm on Grace's watch pinged. Her sister-in-law glanced at her wrist and yelped. "I'm helping out at the clinic this afternoon. I've gotta run."

Grace had first met Nick through her work as the head RN at a free clinic where Nick volunteered. The entire Tucci family believed in giving back to the St. Louis community.

Grace glanced around. "I wonder where the server went. I need to pay—"

Raven put a hand on her sister-in-law's arm. "I've got it covered."

"You're sure?"

"Positive."

"Okay, thanks. Next time, lunch is on me." Grace smiled. "We'll celebrate."

Raven inclined her head. "What will we be celebrating?"

"Why, your first date with Will Dougan, of course."



An hour later, Raven reached the cozy coffee shop with her messenger bag over her shoulder. As she reached for the handle, the door opened, and she found herself face-to-face with Derek Brown. He was one of Will's friends and, like her, a coffee shop regular.

He offered a friendly smile as he held the door open for her. "Happy holidays, Raven."

"Merry Christmas to you."

"I wondered if you'd be in today."

"Really? Why?"

Instead of answering, Derek only smiled and shrugged. "I wish I could stay and catch up, but," he lifted his phone, "duty calls."

Derek did something with, well, Raven wasn't quite sure. All she knew was that when he was in the shop, he was always on his phone or laptop.

"See you around." Raven wiggled her fingers good-bye and stepped into the shop.

With Christmas less than two weeks away, the interior was in full-on

holiday mode.

Multicolored lights encircled the front window, while strings of white lights spilled from an old-fashioned percolator hung on one wall. Origami stars in yellow, lime green and orange dangled from the ceiling, and a tree in one corner sported decorations brought in by customers.

Raven knew, because Will had told her, that early on Christmas Eve day, the tree—decorations and all—would be taken to the nearest homeless shelter.

As the jingle bells overhead clanged when the door closed, Will looked up from behind the counter. When he caught sight of her, he smiled and lifted a hand in greeting.

Raven resisted the urge to sigh as she returned his wave. His smile, that wonderful, boyish smile that lit up his entire face, had been the first thing she'd noticed last summer when she'd walked into the shop for the first time.

While he had classically handsome features and thick brown hair, his sweet smile was what arrowed straight to her heart. Followed closely by the kindness reflected in his brown eyes.

After her lunch with Grace, Raven had stopped at her apartment to pick up her laptop before heading to Dougan's. She'd touched up her makeup and run a brush through her dark hair. If today was the day she took the plunge and asked Will out on a date, she was determined to look her best.

Just like she had every day since taking her current job, Raven rejoiced at not having to head into a sterile corporate office. Her work as coordinator of civic outreach for a homeless foundation might not pay the best, but the ability to work from home while making a difference offset the low pay.

Her primary responsibilities involved finding businesses in the community willing to either provide services or fund services that helped the homeless and the working poor.

Satisfaction surged as she thought of her most recent success. Yesterday, she'd finalized the details on a project that involved hair stylists volunteering their talents to cut hair for people in homeless shelters. Raven had taken it a step further when she'd secured funding for supplies so a few select stylists with an aptitude for teaching could show several people in tent communities the basics of cutting hair.

Because it wasn't only people in shelters who needed a little extra help around the holidays, a haircutting event in a neighborhood recreation center was planned for Friday.

As Raven took a seat at a table by the window, a new outreach possibility struck her. Even as she keyed in the several areas to explore, she kept her eye on the counter.

The line now reached the door. While she was pleased that business was booming—and on a Wednesday afternoon to boot—she doubted she'd have the opportunity to ask Will out.

She certainly wouldn't while they were surrounded by customers or employees. Seeing no immediate end in sight to the parade of customers, Raven focused on the work in front of her.

Thirty minutes later and deep in concentration, Raven jumped at the light tap on her shoulder.

She inhaled sharply, then exhaled when she saw who stood beside the table.

"Will." She offered him a warm smile. "Hi."

"Hi, yourself."

She gestured to the chair at her table and tried not to let her eagerness show. "Can you join me?"

Regret swept across his face.

"I can't." He gestured with his head toward his staff, who were busy behind the counter. "Though the line is less, it's still all hands on deck."

"That's too bad." She lifted a hand when he started to say something. "I'll be in tomorrow. Hopefully, we'll have a chance to catch up."

Since they'd spoken yesterday, it wasn't likely there was much to catch up on, but she liked feeling like she was a part of Will's day-to-day routine.

"Someone wanted you to have this." Will set a prettily wrapped box on the table.

Glancing at the package, Raven inclined her head. "Who wanted me to have this?"

"Some guy." Will shrugged. "He said it was from your Secret Santa."

Raven simply stared at the shiny red paper and white puffy bow.

"Aren't you going to open it? You're always saying how much you love surprises." The look in his eyes and his tone made it clear that he had enough curiosity for both of them. "Besides, whoever it's from might have put his name inside on a card."

"You really don't know who left the gift for me?"

"I told you, your Secret Santa. Come on, Raven," he nodded toward the box, "get into the Christmas spirit." Then, lowering his lips to her ear, he

whispered, “What I can say is that the man is an admirer.”

Raven’s heart squeezed. He didn’t have to sound so, well, cheery about her having a secret admirer. If the roles were reversed, she wouldn’t want him having a secret admirer. And she certainly wouldn’t be encouraging the woman.

Then again, if a customer did leave this gift for her, Will really wouldn’t have any choice but to deliver it.

Expelling a breath, Raven picked up the package and carefully unwrapped it. Seconds later, she lifted a white ceramic mug that read “A day without coffee is like... Just kidding, I have no idea.”

Her lips curved in a smile. “Whoever this secret admirer is, he knows how much I love my coffee.”

“You like it?”

Raven lifted her gaze and met his brown eyes. “Were you hoping I wouldn’t?”

A look of startled surprise skittered across his face. “No. I was just wondering.”

Without thinking, Raven reached over and gave his hand a squeeze. “I’m not interested in this Secret Santa, secret admirer, whatever, whoever, he is.”

She met Will’s gaze, trying to will him to see the truth, that there was only one man in this shop she was interested in, and that man was standing right beside her.



Hoping that this time she’d get a chance to speak with Will privately, Raven carefully planned her next day’s visit to the coffee shop. She chose to arrive at nine a.m., thinking by that time most people had already been in for their morning caffeine fix.

Though the walk to the shop was a short one, Raven turned up the collar of her coat to keep the wind off her neck. She had the worst time keeping up with scarves. Gloves she understood misplacing—they were easy to take off and leave behind. But why—how—did she keep losing her scarves?

She breathed a sigh of relief when she reached the door to Dougan’s. The jingle bells over the door had her smiling, as did the sight of the man behind the counter. This time, not a single customer was in line.

Pulling off her gloves, she shoved them into her pocket as she strode to the counter.

“Good morning, Raven.”

The way he said her name, coupled with the welcoming look in his eyes, had warmth sliding through her veins. “Good morning back. How’s your day going so far?”

“It’s definitely looking up.” The gaze that lingered on her face felt like a caress. “What can I get you today?”

“Same.” She chuckled. “One of these days, I’m going to surprise you and order something different.”

“Don’t go changing too much.” Will shot her a wink. “I like you just the way you are.”

Raven’s heart gave an excited leap. She had a good feeling about today.

“Are you staying or going?” he asked.

“Staying.” She gestured with her head toward her favorite table by the window. “I plan to sit and relax for a few before I get started.”

Grabbing a red ceramic mug, he filled it with coffee, then set it on the counter.

When she fished for her wallet in her bag, he waved a hand.

“This one is on the house.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“Thank you.” Raven hesitated. “Do you have time to have a cup with me?”

Please say yes. Please say yes.

“I believe I can make that work.” Taking off his apron, Will turned to a young man behind the counter. “Jake, I’m taking a break. I’ll be right over there. If you need help, holler.”

“I’ve got it under control.” Jake’s gaze shifted from his boss to Raven. “Take all the time you want.”

In that instant, Jake became Raven’s favorite of Will’s employees. She vowed next time he was working the counter, she’d give him an extra tip.

“Grab a seat.” Will squeezed her arm. “I have something to get.”

Raven chose a seat at a table near the Christmas tree and waited for Will to get his coffee. Anticipation sluiced up her spine. She’d texted Grace last night to tell her that the shop had been too busy the day before, and she hadn’t had a chance to ask Will.

Today is the day. She wondered why she felt nervous. She couldn't recall ever feeling this unsure around a man.

Will liked her. She knew in her heart he did. Over the past four months, she'd come to look forward to seeing him, to talking about current events and things happening in each of their lives. She hoped she didn't lose that by presuming he wanted more.

When he reached the table, Will sat down opposite her. After placing his coffee mug on the table, he handed her another present. Prettily wrapped in Christmas green, it boasted a black and white polka dot fabric bow and a small tag that read "From Your Secret Santa."

Staring at the present in her hand, Raven let out a small sigh. "Oh no."

Will's head cocked. "You don't like the surprise?"

He sounded so dismayed she wondered if he had a Christmas gift for her sitting under his tree.

"I love surprises, and normally I love gifts." Raven stared at the package. "But not from someone I don't know. At least I don't think I know this guy." She looked at Will for confirmation. His expression gave nothing away, so she prompted, "Though the mug would indicate he knows me, at least a little."

Will took a sip of coffee and shrugged. "Raven, if you want me to stop passing on the gifts, I will. But isn't it kind of nice to know that someone around here notices when you stop in for coffee or work at one of the tables?"

"So, you're saying he sees me when I'm sipping, and he knows when I'm at work?"

Will's booming laugh filled the room. "Exactly." He lifted his coffee mug in a toast. "To the spirit of the season!"

Raven chuckled. She wasn't going to let this Secret Santa, whoever he was, knock her off course.

She would open the gift, then set it aside so she and Will could talk about more important things, like where to go on their first date. Untying the bow, Raven carefully removed the wrapping, opened the box, and gasped.

CHAPTER TWO

“I can’t believe you haven’t asked him yet.”

Same song, second verse. Raven had known Grace would bring up her and Will when she’d agreed to go dress shopping with her sister-in-law on Wednesday. The Evergreen Gala was on Saturday, so time was indeed running out.

As this year’s theme was Christmas Carnival, guests at the black-tie event were encouraged to wear masks with their formal attire. At the end of the evening, there would be a reveal.

Grace already had a gorgeous Venetian half eye mask she couldn’t wait to wear. All her sister-in-law needed was a dress.

Raven needed both.

As if not expecting a response to her comment, Grace held up a red lace dress.

Raven considered, then shook her head. “Lovely, but not with your coloring.”

Grace pushed it at her. “I was thinking for you.”

Raven reluctantly took the dress. Either that, or let it drop to the floor. “I’m not sure I’ll go.”

Less than a month ago, she’d had high hopes. Back then, the image of her and Will walking arm in arm into the majestic ballroom had been so vivid, she could practically smell the evergreen from the elaborate floral displays.

If she was a betting woman, she had a better chance of showing up with her secret admirer rather than with Will.

“You never told me what happened yesterday.” Grace’s voice softened as she placed a hand on Raven’s arm. “Why didn’t you ask him?”

“See this scarf?” Raven lifted the end of the black and red plaid.

Reaching out, Grace fingered the fabric. “Cashmere. Nice. The colors go perfectly with your coat.”

“My Secret Santa gave it to me.”

“You didn’t tell me you were involved in a Secret Santa gift exchange.” Grace inclined her head, a smile hovering on the edges of her lips. “Is it through your job?”

“It’s not really a gift exchange. It’s a secret-admirer thing.” Raven handed the dress to the clerk and followed the perky blonde into the dressing room.

Snatching up a gold dress she’d been eyeing, Grace hurriedly followed Raven into an ornate dressing room the size of Texas.

“There’s plenty of open rooms.” Raven glanced at her sister-in-law.

“This one is big enough for two.” Grace turned to the clerk. “We’re fine.”

Once the woman left, Grace made a come-ahead motion with her hand. “You can’t tell me something like that, then walk away.”

Raven laid it out for Grace, beginning with the coffee mug and ending with the scarf. “Whoever this guy is, he knows me.”

“It’s sweet, but kinda creepy at the same time.” Following Raven’s lead, Grace began to undress.

Raven shook her head. “Will wouldn’t be a part of it if the guy was a creeper.”

“Maybe we should have Sal look into this. With his police background, he’d have your Secret Santa unmasked all the way down to his boxer briefs in no time.”

That would be far too mundane a task for her brother, a former undercover cop and now in charge of security for his wife—popular Christian recording artist Sara Michaels—though Raven knew he would gladly run interference.

Raven closed her eyes, imagining Sal interviewing—more like interrogating—Will to determine her secret admirer’s identity. “Absolutely not.”

When Grace opened her mouth, Raven held up a hand.

“I mean it, Grace. This guy has done nothing wrong. If I wanted the gifts to stop, I’d tell Will to quit accepting them.” Raven pulled her brows together. “What bothers me most about this is that Will seemed happy for me to have someone who likes me. It makes me wonder if I’m misreading his signals.”

“Maybe Will is your Secret Santa.”

Hope surged, but Raven quickly tamped it down. “I suppose he could be, but if he wanted to give me gifts, why wouldn’t he just do that?”

“Good point.” Grace tapped her lips with two fingers, her gaze thoughtful. “You mentioned one time Will has a friend who’s a coffee shop regular.”

Raven’s heart sank. “Derek.”

Grace inclined her head. “Could it be him? Or maybe another regular?”

“It has to be a regular for them to know me.” Raven breathed out a breath. Yes, it had to be one of the men she frequently crossed paths with at the shop. She just wished she knew which one.

A knock sounded at the dressing room door. “May I get you ladies anything?”

“We’re good.” Raven reached for the dress, eager to put the Secret Santa mystery aside for a few minutes. She slipped on the dress and smiled at her reflection in the mirror. If she did decide to attend the Evergreen Gala, she’d found the perfect thing to wear.



Raven strode into the coffee shop the next day and saw Will in deep conversation with Derek at the counter. Several women in the shop were casting admiring glances in the direction of the two men.

She could understand why they stared. Will was adorable, and Derek, with his wavy blond hair that brushed his collar and muscular build, was objectively attractive.

Not wanting to interrupt, Raven set up her laptop and went to work. She was so engrossed in a spreadsheet that her head jerked up when she heard the sound of a chair scrapping across the hardwood.

She smiled when she saw Will. A quick glance around the shop showed no sign of Derek.

Will gestured to the chair he’d just pulled out. “May I join you? If you’re busy, I can—”

“No, please sit.” Raven saved her work, then shut her laptop. “You’ve been so busy we haven’t had much of a chance to talk.”

“The downside of a business boom.”

Why was it that Will's gaze on her face felt like a soft caress? How could one simple look have her feeling so off-balanced? She'd done her share of dating, but no one, absolutely no one, had ever had this effect on her.

Raven took a sip from the water bottle she'd brought with her, needing the moisture on her suddenly dry throat.

Why was he looking at her that way?

She gestured carelessly with one hand toward the empty seats at the counter. "I saw you and Derek talking. Looked like an intense conversation."

Will laughed. "Everything with Derek is intense."

"You mentioned once that you two are good friends."

"We are. Actually, Derek is more like a brother than a friend."

Over the past four months, family was one topic they'd touched on but never fully discussed. It wasn't as if she were embarrassed by her parents and brothers—quite the contrary. There had just been so much else to talk about.

Raven cocked her head. "You're an only child, right?"

Her three older brothers might have been massive pains in her backside growing up—heck, even now they tested her patience—but she couldn't imagine life without them.

"That's right." Will nodded. "I don't know if I mentioned that Derek and I grew up next door to each other. We've been best buds since childhood."

How odd to be having this discussion now. Odd, but good. She wanted a deeper relationship with Will, one that went beyond coffee-shop talk and flirting.

Before she could delve more deeply into Will's friendship with Derek, Will frowned. "Where's your coffee?"

"There was a line." Raven waved an airy hand. "Instead of waiting, I took a seat and started working."

"May I get you a cup now?"

"You most certainly may." Raven shot him a bright smile, then leaned forward and spoke in a conspiratorial whisper. "I'd kill for some caffeine."

Will laughed. "In that case, I'll get it right away."

He hurried off, and Raven watched him go and kept watching him while he filled two cups, admiring the lean look of him. While she could see how some women might find Derek attractive, Will did it all for her.

He returned to the table with not only coffee but also an orange scone, her favorite.

"Thank you." Raven brushed a strand of hair out of her face with the back

of her hand and smiled. "You know me so well."

"You're pretty much a creature of habit." Will chuckled. "I think anyone who spent any time in this shop would have a good idea what Raven Tucci likes."

Raven made a great show of cutting off a bite of scone and popping it into her mouth. Will had said her Secret Santa had seen her in the shop, meaning he could easily be a regular customer.

The second bite of scone stopped just short of her mouth. She thought of the conversation between Derek and Will. Could Grace be on to something? Could Derek be her secret admirer?

No. No. No.

She wasn't interested in Derek. His regular presence in the coffee shop hadn't even been a blip on her radar.

Still, from having three brothers, she knew men, good men, had their own code of ethics. She recalled vividly years ago when her brother Anthony had liked a woman her other brother Nick had been hoping to date. Both men had backed off.

"What were you and Derek discussing?" Normally, Raven would never think to ask such a personal question. This was different. If they'd been talking about her...

"Nothing much. You know, I didn't realize one of your brothers is married to Sara Michaels." Will gave a little laugh. "Of course, until yesterday, I didn't even realize you had a brother named Sal."

If he'd meant to get the subject off his and Derek's conversation, he'd succeeded.

Raven took a long sip of coffee, her mind racing in a thousand different directions. "You know Sal?"

"I don't know him or his wife." Will smiled. "There was an article in yesterday's *Post-Dispatch* about the money your sister-in-law donated from the proceeds of her last concert tour. The article mentioned her husband and family, including you."

"Me?" Raven's voice rose. While she normally scrolled through the paper on her phone in the evening, last night she'd deleted the edition without reading. "What did it say?"

"It mentioned your job doing civic outreach for the foundation." Admiration shone in Will's dark eyes. "It appears the spirit of giving back to the community is alive and well in the Tucci family."

Raven nodded. "My parents are big into philanthropy."

"Very admirable. And speaking of giving..." Will squeezed her hand. "There's another gift for you in the back room."

Raven was seriously tempted to tell Will to toss it in the trash, but she resisted the impulse. If Will's best friend *was* her secret admirer, they were both between a rock and a hard place. She didn't want the gift, but she also didn't want to put Will in an awkward position. Not with a man who was like a brother to him.

If he'd promised Derek he'd give her the gift...

Well, she would accept this one, but no more. Somehow, she needed to make that clear to Will.

"If you promised you'd give it to me, then I'll take this last one." She kept her tone light. "You and I should have done our own Secret Santa gift exchange."

"Except then we'd know who the gifts were from." He shot her a wink. "Where's the surprise in that?"

"I suppose that's true."

"I'll get the gift." Despite the pronouncement, he made no move to get up. "Do you have big plans for Christmas?"

"Not really. Normal stuff. Dinner with my family on Christmas Day." She hesitated. "I've thought about going to the Evergreen Gala on Christmas Eve."

"Sounds nice." He smiled, and she noticed he still held her hand. "Being with you like this, well, it's also nice. With the shop being so busy, we haven't had much of a chance to talk."

"It isn't busy now. No customers, no rush." Raven glanced around. "Right now, we're the only living beings in this place."

Abruptly pulling his hand from hers, he stood. "I'll be right back."

He disappeared into the back, and Raven sighed. Two steps forward, one step back.

Will returned in a matter of minutes, carrying a small white cardboard carrying case decorated with sprigs of holly. He set the box on the table in front of her.

Raven realized she'd made a mistake about them being the only living creatures in the shop when something shifted inside the box, and she heard a tiny *mew*.

Her heart flip-flopped. Now that she looked closely, she saw small air

holes in the box.

Raven looked up, realizing that Will still stood next to the table. “I’ve always wanted a pet, but my mom is allergic to both dogs and cats.”

“Aren’t you going to open it?”

With trembling hands, Raven reached inside and pulled out a fluffy kitten with a sweet face, ebony fur and bright green eyes.

She cuddled it close, then looked up at Will. “She has black hair and green eyes, just like me.”

“She does.” He grinned. “You said you like cats.”

“I love kitties.” Raven laughed as she placed the kitten in her lap and stroked the soft fur. “We had that whole discussion a couple of weeks ago about how I’d always wanted a kitten and hoped to get one after Christmas. It appears Christmas came early.”

Her smile faded as she recalled Derek had been in the shop at the time of that discussion. Sitting a table away, he’d appeared to be totally focused on his laptop, but it would have been easy for him to overhear.

She touched the tiny bell on the slim red collar decorated with skating penguins. “I’m going to need to find a pet store and get this little one the basics.”

“Everything you need is in the back.” Will reached over and scratched the kitten behind its ear. “Your Secret Santa is thorough.”

Raven nodded. She had to admit the man was indeed thorough. And thoughtful. And attentive. He seemed more tuned into her likes and needs than most of her past boyfriends had—

No. Raven stopped herself. She could not, would not, let Derek, or whoever this Secret Santa might be, hijack her evening. Or damage her budding relationship with Will. Will was the man she wanted. Not some mystery man, no matter how thoughtful he might seem. Will was thoughtful, too, and he was right here. No mystery and no more waiting.

“It’s nearly closing time, and it’s snowing.” Will gestured with his head toward the window.

Raven glanced and saw he was right. Fluffy white flakes drifted lazily to the ground. “Perfect.”

“Perfect?” he repeated, appearing confused.

“Yes, perfect. You can close the shop, then you can come up to my place and help me get my new kitten settled.” She hesitated. Maybe she was taking too much for granted. “Unless there’s somewhere else you need to be?”

She'd given him an out. It would be easy for him to say he had plans for the evening if he thought he'd be stepping on Derek's toes or just didn't want to spend any more time with her. Whatever the outcome, she was determined to seize the moment and let him know how she felt.

Will smiled. "There isn't anything I'd rather do than spend the evening with you."

CHAPTER THREE

Raven pushed open the door to her apartment, grateful she'd tidied up this morning. Not that it was ever super messy. It was just sometimes when she was involved in a project, she wasn't as good about making sure everything was in its place.

Will stood just inside the door and glanced around. "This has a welcoming vibe."

Though she'd grown accustomed to the unit she'd moved into last summer, Raven paused and tried to see it through his eyes. The large living room area flowed into an eating area and the kitchen. The hardwood floors were glossy, and since the building was old, ornate crown molding adorned the walls, and large windows overlooked the street.

"I enjoy it." She turned to him. "It's just me, so the one bedroom and one bath work."

"That's what I have, too," Will told her.

"Let me take your coat." She held out a hand. "No roommate?"

"I used to have one." His tone remained matter-of-fact. "I work a lot of hours, and he pretty much had nights and weekends free, so there were always people there when I'd come home."

He handed Raven his coat, then held up his hands. "Totally his right, but I was never able to relax. When our lease was up, we decided to go our separate ways. We're still friends and all. Actually, we're much better friends now that we don't live together."

He stopped suddenly, as if realizing he was babbling.

Raven decided he was nervous, though why, she wasn't certain. She hung up their coats, dropped her messenger bag and gestured to the sofa. "Have a

seat. Can I get you something to drink?”

“I’m good.” After he set down the kitty carrier and sack of pet supplies, Will’s gaze settled on the tree in the corner. Instead of sitting, he strode to it and studied the ornaments. “These are unique.”

The one he pointed to was made out of plastic and tied with a lopsided bow. Raven laughed. “When we were little, my mom let us make an ornament each year.”

He arched a brow.

“Yep, I made this gem.” Raven’s lips curved. “Though this might not be a designer tree, seeing the ornaments I cobbled together through the years brings happy memories. I—”

A demanding *mew* came from the carrier. Whatever thought was in Raven’s mind fled. “Oh no, I forgot about Ebby.”

As she bent over to open the carrier, Will moved close. “Ebby?”

Raven took a moment to inhale the intoxicating scent of his cologne. More spicy than sweet, with a pleasing note of citrus. She smiled, then refocused on the kitten. “On the way up the steps, I decided to call her Ebony. Ebby for short.”

Will gave an approving nod. “I like it.”

And I like your cologne, Raven thought as she lifted the kitten and held her against her chest. Ebby immediately began to purr. “I’m so sorry, little precious.”

Will’s lips twitched. “Little precious?”

“You’re going to have to help me out here.” Raven turned a pleading gaze to him. “I’ve never owned a cat, or rather, a kitten, before. What do I need to do?”

“It will be easy for her to be overwhelmed by a new place, so you might want to confine her to one room—with her litter box—until she feels comfortable.”

Raven brought a finger to her mouth as she considered the best option. Her lips began to tingle when Will’s gaze settled on her mouth. “We should probably put her in the bathroom. At least for now.”

“Sounds good.” They spent the next few minutes putting litter into the plastic pan and removing any items from the bathroom that they didn’t want her to get her tiny little claws into.

Raven set bowls of kitten chow and water on the floor, then straightened.

“Don’t forget the toys.” Will held out a yarn ball with a bell inside and a

mouse with an extremely long tail.

Tossing the ball on the floor, Raven watched Ebby scamper after it, bat it away, then race after it again. When Raven dropped the mouse to the floor, the kitten's attention shifted.

"How do we teach her to use the litter box?" Raven asked.

"You don't need to teach her. Not usually, anyway." Will's gaze grew thoughtful. "I think, but I could be wrong, that there is something in the litter that attracts them to it."

He put a hand on Raven's arm, and she felt the heat all the way through her sweater. "Let's leave her alone to play for a while."

Raven hesitated, but only for a second. What Will had said about Ebby needing to settle herself made sense. Besides, even though the bathroom was small, there was a lot of area for a small kitten to explore.

When they returned to the living room, Raven turned on the lights on the tree. "It won't be long until Christmas is here, and I'll have to take it down."

"Some people leave their tree up well into January. My parents take ours down on New Year's Day." Will placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder, understanding flickering in his warm brown eyes. "Quit looking at the bathroom door. She's fine."

"You're right. We just left." Raven gave a little laugh. "I'll probably be one of those helicopter moms who won't let their kids out of their sight."

"I'm sure you'll be an amazing mother."

"What makes you think that?"

"You have a kind, caring heart." Will dropped down on the sofa and patted the spot beside him. "Sit and relax. Tell me how you ended up in this neighborhood."

After Raven sat, she shifted her body to face him. "What do you mean 'this neighborhood'? Your business is located in this neighborhood."

"Hey, no offense intended. I love this area. Two decades ago, I can guarantee no one anticipated the landscape in this area would look like it does now." Will's expression grew serious. "When I was looking for a location for the coffee shop, I deliberately chose an area that was experiencing a grassroots resurgence."

"Why a coffee shop?" Raven recalled his story of how he'd once been a stockbroker, and while he'd enjoyed aspects of the work, it hadn't been what he wanted to do long term. "I meant to ask you that time we were talking about how we'd ended up where we are now, but we were interrupted."

His lips curved. “The bridge club tournament.”

“Who knew so many people played bridge?” Raven shook her head, recalling the horde of card sharps that had descended on the shop once their tournament concluded.

“I wanted to open a coffee shop because I like the idea of being part of something that helps the local economy.” Will paused. “I also like the idea of providing a warm and welcoming place for people to gather. And I love coffee.”

Raven chuckled. “I think that’d be an absolute must.”

“You know, Raven...” She liked the way he said her name as he reached over and took her hand. “You and I might never have met if not for the coffee shop.”

“I believe we’d have found each other some way.” Closing her fingers around his, Raven gazed at him, trying to will him to see that she wanted him to kiss her. If, after five seconds he didn’t get the message, she planned on kissing him.

It took only to the count of three for him to tip up her chin and cover her mouth with his.

The kiss, gentle as spring rain, still packed a punch.

His gaze searched her eyes, looking for what, she wasn’t sure. Perhaps a sign that he hadn’t overstepped?

Words might hold power, but so did actions. Which was why Raven leaned in, wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back.

The kiss started out slowly, as if they had all the time in the world. She slid her fingers into his hair, loving the feel of the soft strands between her fingers. He smelled good, too, like soap and shampoo and an indefinable male scent that sent her heartrate skyrocketing.

His arms were now around her, and she gave herself up to the moment, knowing she was right where she belonged. His lips found hers again and again.

The *woof-woof-woof* of the song “Who Let the Dogs Out” had Raven jerking back. Then she realized it was only a ring tone. By then, Will had sat back, reached into his pocket and stilled the offending sound by answering the call.

Will pushed to his feet and crossed the room, the phone pressed to his ear. “What’s up, Derek?” He glanced at Raven. “I’m with her.” Though he lowered his voice even more, she heard his next words. “Yes, she liked the

cat.” His expression grew serious as he listened. “I know. I understand. But —”

Raven slowly rose to her feet and considered her options. Instead of moving closer to Will, where she might be able to hear more of the conversation, she headed to the bathroom to check on Ebby.

The kitten looked up from where she was rolling around on the floor, holding the small stuffed mouse between her front paws.

“Hi, Ebby. I was just checking on you.” Several pieces of kibble were on the floor, and if Raven wasn’t mistaken, Ebby had made use of the litter box. “I’ll be back.”

Even before she pulled the door fully shut, Ebby had tossed the mouse into the air, flipped, then leaped on it.

As the bathroom door clicked shut, Raven paused and listened for the sound of Will’s voice, but she heard only silence.

She came to an abrupt stop at the edge of the living room. Disappointment coursed through her when she saw Will now wore his coat.

“You’re leaving?” She couldn’t keep the dismay from her voice.

“I hate to go, but there’s something I need to take care of.”

The fact that he appeared reluctant to leave had Raven moving to him and placing a hand on his arm. “Is there anything I can do to help with whatever it is?”

He stroked one hand gently down her hair. “I’m afraid not.”

Had Derek jumped on Will for spending time with a woman Derek wanted for himself? Could that be why Will felt he had to leave? Or was there some other entirely unrelated reason?

She really hoped it was door number three.

In the past, Raven had waited for the men she dated to voice their feelings first. This time, she gingerly stepped onto uncertain ground that could crack beneath her feet at any moment. Her gaze met Will’s. “You need to understand that I don’t just go around kissing any old coffee-shop owner. I kissed you because I really like you.”

“I know that, Raven.” The slight smile he offered gave her hope, the deep rumble of his voice doing strange things to her insides.

When he kissed her this time, it felt like a promise. But a promise of what?

“Are you sure you can’t stay?”

He shook his head. “I would if I could.”

“Why can’t you?”

She’d never been pushy with any man, and she wasn’t about to start now, but she had the clear feeling that Will wanted to stay as much as she wanted him to.

“It’s complicated.” He kissed her again, this time until her knees turned to mush.

Then he was gone.

Head spinning, Raven stumbled across the room and sank into the nearest chair.

What the heck did *it’s complicated* mean? And what role did Derek play?

CHAPTER FOUR

Raven didn't normally drop in on family unannounced, but by the time she thought about texting, she was pulling up to the curb in front of Sal's home.

Five years ago, an undercover assignment had meant her brother had embraced his persona as "Crow" in every way. Raven had worried he'd been in too deep for too long. She, along with the rest of the family, had feared the brother they knew and loved had been lost to them.

Now, as she gazed at his Cape Cod home with the white picket fence and brick walkway, a smile lifted her lips. When Crow, er, Sal, had taken a break from the police force and hired on as Sara's bodyguard, everything had changed.

Everything except for the fact that her brother could still be one of the scariest men she knew without even trying.

She didn't even have a chance to knock when the door swung open. While Sal, and the snake tat encircling his right bicep, reminded her of a fierce warrior, his wife had the looks—and the voice—of an angel.

It was Sara who greeted her, dressed in a fluffy blue robe, her silvery-blond hair spilling over her shoulders. She motioned Raven inside, her smile open and friendly. "Raven, it's good to see you. Sal will be right down. I heard your car drive up and promised to keep you company while he dried off...and put on some clothes. He was working out and needed a shower in the worst way."

"I'm sorry." Raven resisted the urge to look at her phone and check the time. She'd sworn when she left her apartment that it hadn't been that late. "Were you in bed?"

"Just relaxing. This last tour took it out of me. I'm going to be kicking

back until the baby arrives.” Sara’s hand dropped to rest on her growing baby mound.

“Hey, Raven.”

Raven shifted her gaze to the top of the stairs. “Sorry to interrupt your evening.”

Dressed casually in jeans that hugged his thighs and a long-sleeved Henley that spanned his broad chest, Sal impressed. It wasn’t just that, at six foot two, Sal dwarfed many men, his muscular build, handsome face and confident air drew the eye. When his hair had been long and the snake tat prominently displayed, he’d looked dangerous.

Even now, with his black hair cut stylishly short, there was something about Sal’s piercing gaze that intimidated. Not her. She remembered all too well the farting contests he’d had with Nick and Anthony.

Recalling all the childish escapades her brothers had engaged in brought a smile to Raven’s lips.

“You’re always welcome.” When Sal reached the bottom of the steps, he narrowed his gaze. “Are you going to take off your coat and stay awhile? Or is this another one of your hit-and-run visits?”

“Sal, she just walked through the door.” Sara smiled at Raven. “May I take your coat?”

“Thank you.” Raven shrugged out of her coat. After handing it to Sara, she focused on her brother. “You and I have a lot to talk about.”

He grinned suddenly. “Can’t wait to hear what I did now.”

“Who said you did anything?” Raven shot him a sly glance as she took a seat in one of the comfortable chairs, crossing one long leg casually over the other.

“I recognize the tone as well as that look in your eye.” Sal waited for Sara to take a seat on the sofa, then dropped down beside her, resting an arm around her shoulders.

When Sara leaned into him, and he pressed a kiss against her hair, Raven’s heart melted. What she wouldn’t give to sit beside Will and have him look at her that way.

“Before you leave,” Sara said before Raven had the chance to say anything, “don’t let me forget to give you your tickets for tomorrow night’s concert. They’re sitting on the credenza. I have one for you and a guest.”

Raven pulled her brows together in puzzlement. “I thought you weren’t doing any more concerts until after the baby.”

“Just this Christmas one at Sheldon Concert Hall,” Sara clarified. “I’ll be singing everyone’s holiday favorites.”

“Sheldon? Why there?” Raven inclined her head. “I mean, it’s lovely, and the acoustics are amazing, but you usually play larger venues.”

“This is a concert for family and friends.” Sara smiled. “I wanted an intimate venue. Relaxed and comfortable, yet festive.”

“I don’t recall hearing about this before,” Raven told her sister-in-law. “Is this concert a last-minute kind of thing?”

“I thought I’d mentioned it to you before, but from your response, it appears I didn’t. I’m sorry, Raven. Blame it on baby brain.” Sara sighed and raked a hand through her hair. “I realize this isn’t much notice, but if you’re not busy, I’d love to see you there.”

“You may have mentioned it, and I spaced.” Raven chuckled. “But I’ll definitely be there.”

Sal studied her with inscrutable dark eyes. “You should bring your Secret Santa.”

“You know about that, do you?” Raven resisted the urge to sigh. It was as she thought. Grace had gone to Nick, and Nick had contacted Sal.

“You have a Secret Santa?” Sara’s eyes brightened. “Who is he or she?”

“A guy, for sure. That’s all I know.” Raven kept her eyes on Sara. “I happened to mention to Grace when we went dress shopping for the Evergreen Gala that Will—you know the guy who owns the coffee shop I always go to?—has been giving me these Secret Santa gifts from someone and that I wished they were from him. That’s it.”

“How did you know Raven had a Secret Santa?” Sara inclined her head, her large blue eyes now focused on her husband.

“Nick mentioned it. He said Grace was worried.” Sal’s voice soothed and, surprisingly, held a hint of apology.

“Why would Grace worry about Raven having a Secret Santa?” Sara suddenly stilled. “Is this man a stalker?”

“He’s not,” Raven asserted. “It’s simply a Secret Santa thing.”

“Grace was worried for nothing.” Sal spoke firmly. “If I determined Raven was in danger, or there was something to worry about, I’d have told you. But since there was nothing to worry about, I didn’t want to bring back bad memories.”

“And you’re positive there’s nothing to worry about?” Sara asked.

Sal nodded. “I had a friend on the force check out the coffee-shop

owner.” The eyes that met Raven’s didn’t hold the slightest hint of apology. Sal shifted his gaze to his wife. “He’s the intermediary.”

“Let me guess.” Raven’s words pulled her brother’s attention back to her. “You found nothing.”

“Nothing popped.”

“That’s because Will is a good guy.”

Sal gave a grudging nod. “Appears so.”

“Too bad your friend on the force couldn’t find out who is sending me the gifts.” Raven chuckled. “The suspense is killing me.”

“Tell me what gifts you’ve gotten so far.” Curiosity filled Sara’s voice.

“The last gift was a kitten. She—”

“Secret Santa gave you a kitten?” Sara’s eyes widened. “I like him already.”

Raven couldn’t have stopped the smile that spread across her face even if she’d wanted to. “She’s absolutely gorgeous. She’s black with the softest fur and the biggest green eyes.”

“Did she come with a red bow around her neck?” Sara’s eyes sparkled, and she leaned forward, eager for details.

“That would have been cute,” Raven admitted. “Actually, she came in a cardboard carrier decorated with sprigs of holly.”

“I can’t wait to see her.” Sara smiled at her husband, then back at Raven. “Have you named her?”

“Ebony,” Raven told her sister-in-law. “Ebby, for short.”

“Super cute.”

Sal inclined his head. “Secret Santa gave you a cat.”

“Isn’t that what your wife and I have been talking about?” Raven teased. “Did all that gunfire you heard in the line of duty damage your hearing?”

“Har-har. You’re hilarious.” Despite the sarcastic tone, a slight smile hovered at the edges of Sal’s lips.

“The kitten was my most-recent gift.” Raven chewed on her bottom lip. “Honestly, all the gifts have been kind of perfect for me.”

She told them about the coffee mug with the saying that still made her smile and the beautiful cashmere scarf.

“I’m thinking Secret Santa is probably Derek. Will’s friend,” she added when she saw Sara’s confused look. “Since they are such good friends, it makes sense that Will would help him out. Derek is also a coffee-shop regular. My Secret Santa knows me and my tastes too well to be a stranger.”

“Your unexpected appearance suddenly makes sense. You want me to check out this Derek guy.” Sal offered a sardonic smile. “Happy to help. What’s his last name?” Before she could respond, Sal let out a robust laugh that had Raven gritting her teeth. “I’m just jerking your chain.”

Big brothers could be such a pain.

“I just wish I knew who it was.” Raven pulled her brows together. “The not knowing is driving me crazy.”

“What’s up with you anyway?” Confusion filled her brother’s eyes. “You like surprises.”

Raven wasn’t sure how to explain it. She *did* like surprises. “I’d like to know who this person is who knows me so well.”

“Christmas is three days away.” Her brother spoke in a matter-of-fact tone. “You can wait a few more days to find out who is behind these *perfect* gifts.”

How could she explain to her brother that, right now, three days seemed like a lifetime?

Sara reached over and squeezed her hand. “If I knew, I’d tell you.”

“I know you would.” Raven gave Sara a hug and rose. “I need to get home and feed Ebby.”

“Don’t forget the tickets.” Sara moved to the credenza, graceful and elegant despite her baby bump, and picked up the tickets. “I really hope to see you there.”

CHAPTER FIVE

“Thanks for inviting me.” Will, looking breathtakingly handsome in a dark suit, gray shirt and burgundy tie, offered Raven his arm as they started up the walkway leading to the concert hall.

Raven didn’t see any of her family in the crowd surrounding them, but knew they’d all be here tonight. She should have warned Will that there would be endless Tuccis at this event.

“My parents and brothers are here somewhere.” She kept her tone casual and offhand. “You’ll have a chance to meet them, either before the performance or afterwards. They’re all very nice. Except Sal. Well, he’s nice, too. He can just be a little intense.”

“I can’t wait to meet him.” Will patted her hand resting on his forearm. “I’m looking forward to this evening and to getting acquainted with all of your family.”

Nothing he could have said would have reassured her more. Her family was close, and she wanted the man in her life to not just tolerate them, but eventually to love them as she did.

Sara and Grace had fit in so seamlessly, it was as if they’d always been around.

“Yoo-hoo, Raven.”

Raven turned, and there was Grace’s aunt Nellie and her husband, Paul Morrow, a colleague of Nick’s. Raven had liked Nellie from the moment she’d met her. Nellie didn’t tolerate fools and spoke her mind—both admirable qualities in Raven’s estimation.

“It’s so good to see you.” Raven gave the woman a quick hug. “And Dr. Morrow, a pleasure.”

“Paul,” he reminded her as he brushed a kiss across her cheek.

Will remained at Raven’s side, a slight smile on his lips as he observed the interaction.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’d love for you to meet my friend Will Dougan.” Raven quickly performed the introductions, adding at the end, “Nellie is my sister-in-law Grace’s aunt. Her husband, Paul, and Nick are colleagues.”

“Pleased to meet you.” Will studied Paul intently. “If I’m not mistaken, you were the surgeon when my friend Derek Brown broke a bone in his hand.”

Paul cocked his head. “Is your friend happy with the results?”

“Extremely.”

“Then that was me.” Paul’s pithy reply made them all laugh.

“Well,” Nellie put her arm through her husband’s, “we best get inside and find our seats. It was good meeting you, Will. Don’t be such a stranger, Raven.”

When the couple walked off, Will turned to Raven and arched a brow. “Stranger?”

Raven waved a dismissive hand. “I may have missed one-or two-family gatherings this summer.”

“Any special reason?” Will glanced at her as he checked their coats, putting the ticket into his pocket.

Several responses Raven could give would answer his question without her really answering. But she didn’t want to skirt around issues with Will. She wanted a relationship built on honesty.

“Two of my brothers are married, and Anthony has been dating someone steadily.” Raven kept her tone light. “There was a little too much love in the air.”

Raven hadn’t told her parents why she’d split with Stephen. They hadn’t asked directly either, though they appeared relieved when she’d told them she was no longer seeing the man.

Will handed their tickets to the usher.

“Let me show you to your seats.” The usher took them to a small round table covered in red linen with a white topper. Several tea lights in red and green, along with sprigs of greenery and bark, added a festive touch to the table.

Raven had assumed they’d be seated with family, but her parents and sibs were scattered throughout the room. Though that was disappointing, there

would be time after the performance for introductions and conversation. Right now, she'd enjoy having Will to herself.

"What about now?" Will asked after they were seated. "Is too much love in the air still difficult?"

Caught up in the orchestra's arrangement of a Christmas melody, Raven blinked, confused. Then she recalled the conversation before they'd been seated.

"No. I'm happy for the love my brothers have found." Raven paused and considered how much to say, then realized if she and Will were to stand a chance at building a strong relationship, he needed to understand her past. "My breakup with my last ex, Stephen, was tough. Not because I wanted him back—that wasn't it at all. I just wished I'd seen what was right in front of me sooner."

"Stephen was the guy who..." Will's voice trailed off as Raven nodded. When she and Will had talked about past relationships, she had shared that Stephen had cheated.

Sara's longtime manager, Meg, took the stage, precluding Raven from saying more.

"Tonight, Sara will be singing all of your Christmas favorites." Meg smiled. "There will be a point during this evening when Sara will ask you to sing along. When that happens, please sing along."

Laughter rippled through the crowd.

"Now, it is my pleasure to welcome to the stage your friend and mine, Sara Michaels."

Applause filled the concert hall as Sara strode onstage, breathtakingly beautiful in an ice-blue gown that shimmered in the spotlight's glow. She'd left her hair down except for a couple of sparkling clips that held several blond strands back from her face.

"Have you ever seen a more beautiful woman?" Raven breathed the question.

"I'm looking at her now."

When Raven shifted her gaze to him, Will wasn't looking at Sara. He was looking at Raven.

Her heart tripped over itself when Will took her hand and gave it a squeeze.

She offered a tremulous smile, and the night, which had already been quite lovely, took on a golden glow.

Sara sang all the old favorites for nearly an hour before moving into what Raven thought of as the audience-participation part of the evening.

“You’ve been such a great audience. I realize you’ve been sitting for most of the night. It’s time to stand.” Sara smiled, then motioned with her hands for them to rise. “I’d love it if you’d remain standing while we sing these wonderful carols together.”

They started with “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” and Sara’s AV team had arranged to have the lyrics displayed on a large screen.

Raven thought it was a nice gesture but totally unnecessary. She couldn’t imagine anyone in the audience not knowing the words to the Christmas classic.

“O Holy Night” followed the ever-popular “O Come All Ye Faithful.”

Will had a rich baritone. Hearing it did crazy things to Raven’s insides. Or maybe it was the palm he rested against the small of her back.

As her voice joined with his and those of the people surrounding them in “Away in a Manager,” Raven was reminded once again of the reason for the season.

A reason that often got lost in holiday hype and the focus on parties and gifts.

“Thank you for sharing this wonderful evening with me,” Sara said. “We’ll close with ‘Silent Night.’” Her face glowed with the inner peace that came from knowing who she was and what her purpose in this world was. “We’re going to lower the overhead lights. I’d like you to pick up a tea light from your table and join me in singing this beautiful hymn of peace.”

Will took one tea light and, after handing it to Raven, picked up one for himself.

His brown eyes were intense and oh-so-solemn in the dim light.

Raven offered him a smile and was rewarded with one from him.

The voices in the concert hall soared to the heavens, and when the last note ended, a hush fell over the crowd.

The moment, striking and profound, had the room remaining silent as the lights were raised and candles returned to tables. Then the scattered applause of a few swelled to a roar.

After returning to the stage to sing “Mary, Did You Know?” and receiving another standing ovation, Sara waved and left the stage.

The lights in the auditorium flickered on, signaling the concert had ended.

Raven shifted her gaze to where her parents stood, speaking with Stephen

and Celine.

“We don’t have to stay.” Considering the way her insides roiled, Raven could have cheered when her voice came out casual, just as she’d intended. “I know tomorrow is a busy day for you, so if you want us to leave now, that’s okay.”

“I was looking forward to meeting your family.” Will’s voice was as offhand as hers. The confusion in his eyes had her reconsidering.

That and the fact that this was *her* family event, not Stephen’s. She understood why he’d been invited. Stephen, who’d made his fortune in business software, was on the board of directors of the concert hall. He was also a huge patron of Christian music.

Something that now struck her as oddly ironic.

Raven took Will’s arm and gestured to the large group gathered near the stage. “On second thought, let’s say hello to my parents.”

By the time they wove their way across the room, Stephen and his date had moved on to speak with the head of Sara’s production team.

After introducing Will to her parents and to her brothers and their wives, Raven was crossing the room with Will to speak with Sara when she felt a hand on her arm.

She turned, and her smile fell away.

“Stephen.” Her cool gaze took in the woman at his side. “Celine.”

“Nice to see you again, Raven.” Stephen’s curious gaze studied Will, then he extended his hand. “Stephen Comstock, an old friend of the Tucci family. I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“Will Dougan.” Will’s gaze turned assessing, but he said nothing more, other than, “Good to meet you.”

“How do you and Raven—” Stephen began.

“Raven.” Grace’s voice rang out over the din of conversations. “A moment, please.”

“Excuse me.” Taking Will’s arm, Raven maneuvered through the group until she reached Grace.

Looking lovely in green—the color was a perfect foil for her reddish-brown hair—Grace offered a warm smile.

“What did you think of Sara’s performance?” Her sister-in-law shifted her gaze from Raven to Will. “Wasn’t it wonderful?”

“It brought tears to my eyes,” Raven admitted.

Beside her, Will’s brow furrowed in confusion, likely wondering why

Grace had called her over. He opened his mouth just as Nick sneaked up behind Grace and wrapped his arms around his wife from behind.

Grace gave a shriek, then laughed with pleasure when she realized the arms belonged to her husband.

“It’s remarkable.” Will shook his head. “You and Sal could be twins.”

Nick grinned. “Except for the tat, and I’m better with a scalpel.”

Sal appeared and gave his brother a little shove. “I’m better with a knife.”

Nick flashed a smile. “I’m more handsome.”

Sal laughed. “Your own wife couldn’t tell the difference between us.”

“It was one time. From a distance,” Nick protested. “And Grace and I weren’t married yet.”

“I sense an interesting story here.” Will offered a smile.

That was all the encouragement needed for Nick to launch into the story of the time Grace had seen Sal with Sara and thought Nick was cheating on her.

Nick pretended to wipe sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. “Thankfully, Sara was willing to hear me out.”

Raven took Will’s hand. “Let’s go congratulate Sara on her performance.”

Once that was done, they said good-bye to the rest of her family and headed for the exit.

“Normally, we’d all go to my parents’ home, or Sal would have everyone over,” Raven explained to Will as he retrieved their coats. “But with it being so close to Christmas and with Sara being pregnant...”

“Calling it an early night makes sense.” Will helped her on with her coat, his hands lingering on her shoulders as he adjusted her scarf.

Outside, he opened her car door and waited until she was inside before rounding the front of the vehicle and sliding into the driver’s seat. The conversation remained easy on the drive home.

They were nearly to her apartment when Will slanted a sideways glance at her. “Was that the Stephen you told me about?”

“In the flesh.” Raven kept her tone matter-of-fact.

Will’s dark eyes flashed. “Jerk.”

Raven gave a humorless chuckle. “One of many words that perfectly describe him.”

“What I don’t understand is why he was invited tonight.”

“He’s on the board of directors for the venue. The entire board was

invited as a courtesy.”

“Okay, but why is your family still so nice to him?”

“Because they don’t know. I didn’t tell them what he did.”

Will said nothing. He simply waited, as if sensing she had more to say.

“I was embarrassed I’d been so gullible. I’ve always considered myself an excellent judge of character.” Raven turned to look out the passenger’s side window. “Looking back, I believe he’d been cheating on me since shortly after we began dating. I didn’t see it. Each time I questioned something, he was able to explain away my concerns.”

“You trusted him.”

“I did.”

“It’s good you found out before you married him.”

“I wouldn’t have married him.” Raven shook her head. “While I liked him, something was missing from the start. The connection, the closeness, wasn’t...aaack.” Raven made a frustrated sound. “I’m not doing a good job of explaining it.”

“I understand.”

“You do?”

“I’ve had a couple of relationships like that. There was something lacking. Either on their end or on mine.” He gave a little laugh. “The last woman I dated told me I was boring and unimaginative.”

“I hope you know that’s not true.”

He cut the engine and stepped from the car, rounding the front to open her door. When she stepped out, he took her hand.

“At the time, it stung, but there was an element of truth there.” Will brought their joined hands to his mouth and brushed a kiss across her knuckles. “I’m trying to do better.”

“Well, I think you’re perfect just the way you are.”

“You know what, Raven?” Will tugged her to him, then wrapped his arms around her in an embrace that shut out the cold. “I feel the same about you.”

CHAPTER SIX

Raven spent the morning playing with Ebby and wrapping the last of the gifts she planned to take to her parents' house in the morning.

After discovering that bows, ribbons, Christmas trees and kittens weren't a good combination, she finally gave up and put Ebby in the bathroom.

On her way back to the living room, Raven adjusted the tree that now listed several degrees to the left as a result of Ebby's continued efforts to scale it.

Through the window, snowflakes drifted down. The words to "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas" circled in her head. As she began singing the song, her heart lightened. Telling Will the truth about Stephen had made Raven realize how wrong she'd been to keep the truth from her family.

Her parents and siblings deserved to know the kind of man he was. After the holidays, she would tell them why her relationship with him had ended. No sugarcoating, just the facts. She'd make it clear to Sara that if she wanted to continue a business relationship with Stephen, Raven would never hold it against her.

After all, did infidelity in one's personal life extend to questionable practices in one's business life? Raven didn't have the answer.

Her lips curved as she thought how sweet and supportive Will had been. Last night, he'd taken her into his arms, and they'd kissed at her door until her heart hammered and her brain turned to mush.

Which was why she'd forgotten to mention the Evergreen Gala to him.

She knew she could go to the shop and ask him, but worried he'd be busy. Raven pulled out her phone and sent him a quick text instead.

I meant to ask you if you planned on being at the Evergreen Gala and if you wanted to go together.

If a text didn't get results, she'd try to grab him for a second when she stopped in for a latte.

Heading into the kitchen, Raven placed the phone within easy reach on the counter, then busied herself unloading the dishwasher. The distance from the dishwasher to where these commonly used items were stored reminded her of something she wanted to do, but had been putting off for months.

After checking the phone—just to make sure the ringer was on—she reorganized her kitchen, moving dishes and glasses to the cabinet above the dishwasher and relocating silverware to the nearest drawer.

Once those exciting tasks were completed, she returned to the living room to play with Ebby. For nearly fifteen minutes, the laser pointer kept the kitten engaged and Raven's mind off the silent phone.

When Ebby tired of the pointer, Raven tossed some cat toys on the floor and watched the kitten roll, bat and bite at them. A wave of love washed over her. While Raven adored the mug and scarf, Ebby was the sweetest Secret Santa gift of all.

Raven was considering baking a loaf of banana bread—might as well use up those overripe bananas—when she heard a ding.

Her fingers trembled slightly as she scooped up the phone and read.

I've got a thing earlier and won't be able to go until late. You should go ahead, and we can plan on seeing each other there.

Disappointment surged, fast and intense. Only then did Raven realize she thought he'd accept her offer. She'd assumed that after last night, he would want to go with her as much as she wanted to go with him.

Raven scanned the message a second time, trying to read something sweet and hopeful in Will's response.

She knew Will's morning had likely been taken up transporting the tree in his shop to a nearby homeless shelter and setting it up. The shelter wasn't far, so he should be back by now.

Dougan's closed at four today. What was the "thing" he had planned, the "thing" that would cause him to arrive late to the gala?

Not your business, Raven told herself. Will didn't answer to her. They'd gone on only one real date and had kissed a few times. That, she reminded herself, did not a relationship make.

Scooping up Ebby, Raven put the kitten in the bathroom. One day, Ebby

would have the run of the apartment, but not as long as a Christmas tree sat in the living room.

“I’m going out for a candy cane latte,” she told the kitty. “I won’t be long.”

Raven pulled on her coat. After a momentary hesitation, she removed the scarf from the coat tree and wrapped the softness around her neck.

She knew she was only killing time when she pulled out a tube of lipstick and added more color to her lips.

With a sigh, Raven gathered her gloves and headed to Dougan’s. Since it was nearly noon, Will would probably be there. She wasn’t going there to see him, she assured herself. She simply wanted a latte. If their paths did cross, she wouldn’t mention the party.

She reconsidered that stance as the coffee shop came into view. What would be the harm in casually mentioning she wouldn’t mind arriving late at the Evergreen Gala?

The warmth of the shop, as well as the enticing smells of rich Colombian coffee, cinnamon and sugar wrapped around Raven the instant she stepped inside. Anticipation skittered up her spine.

While the number of people in line told her that, even if Will was there, there wouldn’t be much opportunity for conversation, Raven wasn’t worried. She didn’t need much time.

She noticed the tree was gone, replaced by a six-foot-high wooden Santa with bags of coffee peeking out of his sack. Even the jingling bells over the door sounded particularly joyous today. Raven couldn’t keep from smiling. She glanced around the shop.

Her searching gaze came to an abrupt stop when she spotted Will. She inhaled sharply. He wasn’t alone. No, not alone.

Raven’s smile slipped as Will wrapped his arms around a woman with tousled blond hair.

The heart tucked inside Raven’s chest lurched into an erratic rhythm. A sideways step took her out of Will’s line of sight. From where she stood now, he couldn’t see her, but she could see him.

Will’s lips curved as his gaze lingered on the woman’s face. He said something to her, then brushed a kiss across her cheek and stepped back.

When a large group surged into the shop, Raven seized the opportunity to slip out the door before Will could notice her.

She made it one block before she stopped, resting her back against the

window of a bicycle-repair shop, her mind a muddled mass of confusion.

Moments earlier, she'd been convinced she and Will were on their way to forging a strong and lasting relationship. Disappointment rose hot and fast inside her. How could she have misread the signals so completely?

Raven covered the short distance back to her apartment, barely noticing the Christmas lights twinkling on snow-covered branches.

Striding off the elevator at her floor, she ignored the festive holiday music playing in the hallway. Her key was in the door when she noticed a gift bag to the right of the door. Raven frowned. Had that been there when she'd left for the coffee shop? She couldn't be sure.

The envelope peeking out from the red-and-white-striped tissue paper bore her name. Raven grabbed the bag and took it inside. Still holding the sack, Raven went to the bathroom door and released Ebby.

After zooming around the living room like someone who'd downed too many espresso shots, the kitten attacked the ribbons and bows on the coffee table.

Ignoring the kitten's antics, Raven dropped down on the sofa. She pulled out the envelope and opened it. The message from her Secret Santa asked that she meet him at nine by the Christmas tree at the Evergreen Gala.

She tapped the card against her hand and considered. Was Derek her Secret Santa? Was he the reason Will wouldn't go with her to the gala? Or was the blonde the reason?

Raven considered. What would it hurt to meet her Secret Santa? The gala would be a public place, so it'd be safe. Plus, her brothers would be there. And if Will had another woman, why shouldn't she be open to meeting a man who was clearly interested?

Eager to see just what kind of gift her Secret Santa had given her this time, Raven's hand was poised above the tissue as a knock sounded at the door.

"Raven? Are you home? It's Grace."

"Just a minute." Taking the sack with her—no need to put more temptation in front of Ebby—Raven pushed to her feet and crossed to open the door.

Grace flashed a bright smile. "I hoped you were home."

Raven stepped to the side and motioned her sister-in-law inside. "You came at the perfect time. I was just about to unwrap my latest Secret Santa gift."

“You got another one?” The smile slipped from Grace’s face.

Raven held up the pretty red bag covered in dancing Santas. “I did.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Raven caught Ebby studying the tree, her tail twitching from side to side.

“Any idea who it’s from?”

The question pulled Raven’s attention back to Grace. “Nope.”

Grace’s gaze turned speculative. “Any chance it came from Will?”

“Will is out of the picture.” Raven waved a dismissive hand and dropped down on the sofa. “Mostly.”

“Really?” Surprise skittered across Grace’s freckled face as she sat beside Raven. “You seemed happy together last night.”

Before Raven could respond, Ebby raced across the floor, skidded on the hardwood, then snatched a felt bow that had fallen to the floor. Rolling onto her back, she attacked the smooth fabric with gusto.

“She’s a cutie.” Grace smiled at the kitten, then turned back to Raven. “Tell me what happened with Will.”

“I like Will. Everything he said and how he acted toward me led me to believe he liked me, too.” Raven shrugged, puzzled by how she could have misread the depth of his feelings for her.

“What makes you think he doesn’t like you?”

“I believe he likes me, but I discovered there’s another woman in the picture.” Raven lifted her hands. “I’ve never been good being one of many.”

“Me either.” Even as Grace offered an understanding smile, her expression turned solemn. “You saw him with this other woman?”

The felt bow had clearly been an inadequate diversion. Raven sprang up and nabbed Ebby just before the cat leaped onto the tree.

Expelling a sigh of relief at the last-minute save, Raven held up the kitten in one hand. “This is Ebony, also known as Ebby, also known as Trouble. I’m going to put her in the bathroom so we can talk without her destroying the room or toppling the tree.”

By the time Raven resumed her seat on the sofa, it was clear Grace had used the time to organize her thoughts. “Now tell me about this other woman and Will. Start from the beginning.”

“When I got up this morning, I realized that, while Will and I had each mentioned the Evergreen Gala, we made no plans to go together. I texted him this morning asking if he wanted to go with me.”

“Makes sense.” Grace nodded. “How did he respond?”

“He texted back that he was busy today, but was looking forward to seeing me there and—” Raven stopped herself. She was not about to embellish his comment and make it more than it was. “Actually, he just said he was busy and would see me there later.”

Puzzlement crossed Grace’s face. “He didn’t say what he was doing, or why you couldn’t go together?”

“He didn’t.” Raven blew out a breath. “I stopped by the shop for a latte and decided I’d let him know I didn’t mind arriving late if it meant we could go together.”

“Good plan.”

“I thought so.” Raven dropped her gaze to the as-yet-unopened gift in her lap.

“What happened?” Grace pressed.

“The place was packed. I looked for him behind the counter. He wasn’t there.” Raven kept her tone matter-of-fact. “Then I saw him hugging this woman.”

Grace said nothing for a long moment, then said, “I take it the woman couldn’t have been his mother or an aunt.”

“Young. Blond. Beautiful. Will looked at her with such emotion.” Raven expelled a shuddering breath.

“I see how that might have been disturbing.”

Raven chuckled. “Ya think?”

“I also think you don’t have all the information.” Grace held up a hand when Raven opened her mouth. “You don’t know what the deal is with Will. You like the guy, that was apparent last night. If he’s at the gala, which it sounds like he will be, you’ll have more information after tonight.”

“Speaking of tonight.” Raven handed Grace the card. “Secret Santa wants to meet me by the Christmas tree.”

Grace quickly scanned the neatly written missive, then looked up. “Are you going to meet him?”

“Public place. Brothers all there. Sure. Why not?” Raven shrugged. “I’m curious. It’ll also give me the chance to thank him for the nice presents. Including this one.”

Raven lifted the gift sack.

Grace’s eyes snapped with curiosity. “What did you get this time?”

“I was about to find out when you arrived.” Reaching into the sack, Raven pulled out a mask.

“It’s gorgeous.” Raven breathed the words as her gaze lingered on the Venetian half eye mask.

Grace ran a finger down the gilt edging. “The red and cream colors will look amazing with your dress.”

Raven nodded, and her lips slowly curved. “Secret Santa hit another home run.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

The red lace dress Raven had purchased on her shopping trip with Grace fit perfectly. The color was a perfect complement for her dark hair, and the cut flattered her lithe figure. Raven briefly considered pulling her hair into a popular updo, but opted to leave the strands down. She liked the image of a cloud of black hair framing the mask.

The mask, so incredibly lovely and much better than the simple silver eye mask she'd planned to wear, would definitely complete the outfit and add a festive touch.

Though most of her face would be hidden for the majority of the evening, Raven still spent extra time with her makeup. By the time she finished, her eyes were large and smoky, her cheekbones sharp and her lips red and striking.

It wasn't vanity that had her taking one last look in the mirror before she pulled on her wrap. Looking her best gave her confidence.

Raven arrived at the ball soon after the doors opened. An excited shiver traveled up her spine as she checked her coat, her mask firmly in place.

The ballroom of the grand hotel resembled a winter wonderland with dozens of trees dusted with faux snow. Raven paused to inhale the fresh scent of pine mixed with the fragrances emanating from exquisite floral arrangements scattered throughout the room.

A vocalist, dressed in red velvet and ermine, stood in front of the band, her gorgeous voice filling the room with words of love.

The shiny hardwood of the dance floor glimmered from the thousand lights that shone from a painted blue sky overhead. Huge swaths of glittery fabric added to the ambience.

“I’m definitely feeling the comfort-and-joy vibe.”

Raven turned at the feminine voice and smiled at Lori McCashlin. Though she didn’t know Lori well, her husband was a business associate and friend of Raven’s father.

“I think the committee outdid themselves this year,” Raven agreed. She glanced around. “Where’s Drew?”

“He went to get us something to drink. I saw you and wanted to say hello.” Lori’s blond hair was pulled up in one of the updos that Raven had considered for herself. “I haven’t seen you much this year. I wanted to make you aware that I’d love to help out with one or more of your foundation events.”

“That’s wonderful. We can always use volunteers.” Raven would have said more, but Lori’s husband strolled up with two glasses of champagne.

“Raven. It’s good to see you.” Drew, a handsome man in his mid to late forties, had a lean athletic build and blue eyes that radiated warmth.

“You as well.” Raven recalled that Drew’s first wife had died, leaving him alone to raise two girls. Though Lori was nearly fifteen years younger than her husband, from everything Raven had heard, theirs was a love match in every sense of the phrase.

Love match.

Was finding that perfect someone really too much to ask?

Once she and the McCashlins parted, Raven spent the next hours dancing and catching up with friends. She realized that not only had she distanced herself from her family after her breakup with Stephen, she’d distanced herself from her friends.

Well, that self-imposed exile ended tonight. She had nothing to be embarrassed or ashamed about. She’d trusted Stephen. He’d betrayed that trust. The lack was in him, not in her.

Nine o’clock drew near, and Raven’s excitement continued to build. Even as she danced, her gaze continually scanned the guests. With the masks, she wouldn’t be able to spot a coffee-shop familiar face. Still, she couldn’t stop searching for her Secret Santa.

He was here somewhere. Was he watching her? He’d given her the mask, so it wouldn’t be hard for him to spot her. It wasn’t that easy for her. She didn’t know who she was looking for.

Was it Derek? If not him, who? As time continued to tick by, Raven felt like Cinderella facing the stroke of midnight.

Maybe my Secret Santa is Will.

Though it made her feel foolish for hoping, the thought took hold and wouldn't let go.

Taking a couple of steadying breaths, Raven made her way to the Christmas tree. While several couples were nearby, sipping champagne and talking, only one single man stood by the tree.

His back was to her, and he wore an elegant gold and black cape over his tux.

Raven tapped him on the shoulder. "Excuse me, but are you waiting for ___"

"Raven. You showed up." The man flipped back his hood and pulled off his mask. "I'm so glad!"

Raven was tempted to keep her mask on to try to hide her disappointment. Derek was handsome, but seeing him didn't spark even a fraction of the feelings that seeing Will would have.

"Will was right to choose that mask. He knew you'd like—" Suddenly, Derek's eyes grew wide, and he muffled a curse. "I wasn't supposed to say that."

Now, Raven did take off her mask. "Wasn't supposed to say what?"

"Wasn't supposed to mention me."

Raven turned her head toward the voice of the man who approached, a beautiful blonde on his arm.

When the pair reached the tree, the man removed his mask. Will beamed down at her. "I wanted to surprise you myself."

Raven brought a hand to her head, hoping to still the spinning. Why were both Will and Derek standing here? And who was the woman?

As if reading her mind, the woman unlinked her arm from Will's and moved to Derek, who slipped his arm around her waist. She removed her mask and kissed Derek on the cheek.

"Raven, this is Felicity, the love of my life and, as of earlier today, my fiancée." Derek's voice shook with emotion.

"Congratulations." Raven tried to hide her confusion by injecting extra warmth into her tone. "I'm happy for you both."

"Thank you." Felicity held up her left hand, wiggling her fingers, including the one that sported a glittering diamond. "Best Christmas gift ever. With the engagement dinner Derek organized at Carmine's a close second."

"Having you say yes was the best gift you could have given me." Derek

brushed a kiss across Felicity's mouth.

"I think it's time I danced with my fiancé." Felicity's gaze shifted from Will to Raven. "It was nice to meet you, Raven."

Raven watched the couple slip into the crowd.

"You look confused." Will's words drew her attention back to him.

"I am. Just a little." Raven gave a little laugh. "I'd nearly convinced myself Derek was my Secret Santa."

Will's eyes went wide. "Derek? No way."

Raven thought of the love that shimmered so strong in the air between Derek and his fiancée. "I see that now."

Will searched her face. "Did you want him to be your Secret Santa?"

"No." Raven met Will's gaze. "The only man I'm interested in is you."

"You sure about that?" The hope in his eyes tugged at her heart.

"I am." Raven thought back on all the "signs" she'd obsessed over. "The question was how you feel about me. I wasn't sure I was reading the signals right."

"Absolutely right." Tipping her chin up, he pulled her close and closed his lips over hers in a sweet kiss. "I'm gone, gone, gone over you."

Will stepped back, his expression turning serious as he cleared his throat. Reaching into his jacket, Will pulled out a box. "Merry Christmas."

It all made sense now, Raven thought as her fingers curved around the prettily wrapped box.

"The gifts were perfect for me. I wondered how someone I didn't know could know me so well. What I don't understand is why you didn't just tell me they were from you." Raven's gaze never left his face. "You had to know I'd be happy to get gifts from you."

"You mentioned more than once how much you like surprises. I tried to think of something fun, you know, something outside the box. Which is why...Secret Santa." Will offered a lopsided smile. "Every day that you come into the shop is like a gift, so I wanted to give you gifts, too."

"You're right. I do love surprises." Raven gave a little laugh. "You certainly surprised me. That you'd go to all this trouble to do something special for me is incredibly sweet and touching."

Will's brown eyes turned dark and intense. "I know it hasn't been that long, but I care deeply for you, Raven. I've never felt like this about anyone before."

"Neither have I." To lighten the mood, Raven lifted the box and shook it.

“What is this? One last gift from my Secret Santa?”

His quick smile arched straight to her heart. “Not-so-secret anymore.”

She opened the box, and nestled inside was a silver heart locket with a tiny key on a chain. She held the necklace up, the elegant scrollwork on the heart catching the light. “It’s lovely.”

“Raven Tucci, you hold the key to my heart.” Will’s eyes darkened with emotion. “I’m willing to take this relationship as slow or as fast as you want.”

Raven cleared her throat. “Help me put it on?”

She stood and with trembling hands lifted her hair while he clasped the necklace. Turning, Raven rested her hands on his shoulders. “You know what’s the best surprise this Christmas?”

His eyes remained locked with hers as he slowly shook his head.

“You,” she told him, her heart swelling with love as her hand rose to cover the locket. “You, Will Dougan, are the best Christmas gift I’ve ever received. You hold the key to my heart. Now and forever.”



When Raven first appeared in her brother Crow’s book, [AS IF YOU WERE MINE](#), I knew that I wanted to write her story. I hope you enjoyed this heartwarming holiday story and feel, like me, that Will and Raven are going to have a long and happy life together.

SWEET HOLIDAY SURPRISE IS the eighth book in my [Seriously Sweet St. Louis series](#). Each book in this wonderful uplifting series can be read and enjoyed as a standalone, but it’s so much fun to see the characters you’ve grown to love in other stories.

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SNEAK PEEK OF IF I BELONG WITH YOU

Chapter 1

Angel Morelli chewed on her yellow number-two pencil and paid rapt attention to the man at the front of the room.

You have beautiful eyes.

She offered up the compliment, sending it silently across the space between them, smiling with satisfaction when his gaze met hers and he faltered over his words.

His eyes *were* extraordinary—an intriguing shade that hovered between gray and green. Occasionally when he hit a favorite topic, his eyes would glow and the green would turn to a bright emerald. But now, at the end of the day, they'd dulled to a lifeless putty color.

Abandoning her notepad, Angel rested her chin against her palm and studied the young history teacher. He was as blond as she was dark. Tall and muscular, he always dressed professionally. Today he'd worn her favorite combination: a denim shirt and khaki pants. A brightly colored cartoon tie hung loosely around his neck, secured with a once-crisp knot. He looked, she thought idly, just like she liked her men to look.

Immediately the sheer absurdity of the thought struck her and she laughed out loud.

“Angel, perhaps you'd like to share with the class what you find so amusing about nerve gas usage during the Vietnam War.” Jake Weston quirked his eyebrow questioningly.

She groaned to herself. Even though she was twenty-six and not eighteen, she still refused to look foolish in the suddenly sharp and assessing eyes of

what were supposed to be her peers. Angel thought quickly. “That they had the *nerve* to use it?”

Laughter filled the classroom. She stifled an impulse to smile and instead smirked.

The teacher’s lips twitched but his expression was stern. “That will—”

A bell rang and the sounds of conversation and chairs scraping the floor drowned out his words. He halted, as if knowing it would be futile to talk above the clatter that accompanied the end of each school day.

Angel quickly shoved her books into her backpack. She’d promised to meet Crow at three-thirty, and if she hurried she’d have just enough time to grab a candy bar.

Shrugging on her leather jacket, she made her way down the crowded aisle, her thoughts already jumping ahead to her rendezvous in the park.

“Not so fast, Angel.” A familiar deep voice stopped her just before she reached the door. “I need you to stick around for a few minutes. We need to talk.”

She turned slowly and tried to hide her irritation. Normally she’d give anything to spend some time with Jake Weston, but today her meeting with Crow took priority. “I’m in kind of a hurry.”

“This won’t take long.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Five minutes max.” He flashed her an engaging smile. “Guaranteed.”

Angel heaved a resigned sigh. The super-size Milky Way would have to wait. Goodness knows, Crow wouldn’t.

She flipped her hair back from her face and swaggered to the front of the room, not an easy task when her off the shoulder oversized top threatened to fall from her shoulders and her cheetah print leggings felt a size too small.

With each step, his classically handsome features grew more pronounced. Her heart rate increased and the hungry growl in her stomach no longer mattered.

“I knew you couldn’t resist me forever.” Her flippant words ran far too close to the truth to be a joke, yet a boy heading out the door snickered.

Jake shot him a quelling glance before his gaze shifted to the last of the students exiting the room. “Marylou, will you leave the door open as you leave?”

“Sure, Mr. Weston.” The plump blonde gave him an adoring look.

Angel stifled a groan. She hoped she’d never been that obvious when

she'd been a senior.

Jake Weston's gaze shifted to the stack of papers on his desk and he gestured to a nearby chair. "Have a seat."

Angel ignored the offer. Instead she braced a hand against the side of his heavy wooden desk and leaned over the cluttered surface. She inhaled the spicy scent of his cologne and waited for him to look up.

After what seemed an eternity, his gaze rose. "Angel—"

Their eyes locked. Their breathing came in unison. Her legs turned to jelly. Never in all her twenty-six years had she felt more like a school-girl.

She ignored the unfamiliar butterflies and flashed him her most engaging smile. "Are you sure we should be meeting like this?"

A startled expression crossed his face.

He laughed finally, a self-deprecating grin twisting his mouth. "You really had me going. Believe it or not, for a second I thought you were serious."

Angel shrugged, her smile lingering an instant longer. She shoved the hard wood chair against the wall and slowly sat down, using the time to regain her composure.

Although she was pleased he hadn't responded to her bait, a tiny part of her couldn't help but wish he had. It had been a long time since she'd flirted with any man, much less one this handsome, and she found herself reluctant to end the game so quickly. She batted her heavily mascaraed lashes. "Are you sure I was kidding?"

Though she'd meant the words to come out light and teasing, the natural huskiness of her voice added a decidedly sensual edge.

A hint of unease clouded his gaze, and he sat back in his chair putting distance between them. Angel cursed her reckless impulsiveness.

She flashed a smile and punched his shoulder. "I'm not trying to get it on. I already got an old man. He's mad chill."

The tension in his expression eased. "You've already got an old man?"

"Yep." She blew a bubble, then popped it with her finger. "He's old, but not as old as you."

Angel caught a hint of unmistakable relief in the teacher's eyes before he grabbed his planner from the desk drawer. "I know you're in a hurry so I'll get to the point. You've been a student here at Woodland Hills for what—two weeks?"

"Something like that," she said.

It had actually been closer to three. Three frustrating weeks of listening and asking and observing. Three weeks gone—and she knew nothing more than when she'd first arrived.

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