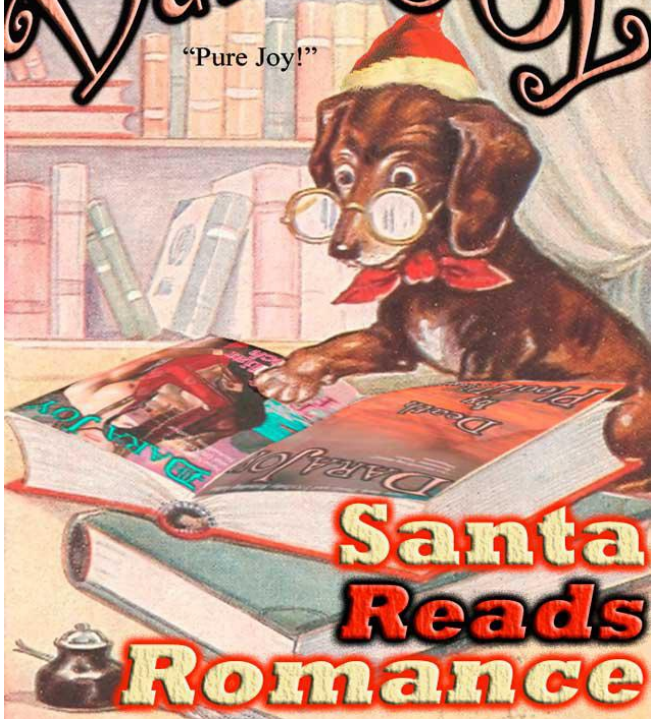


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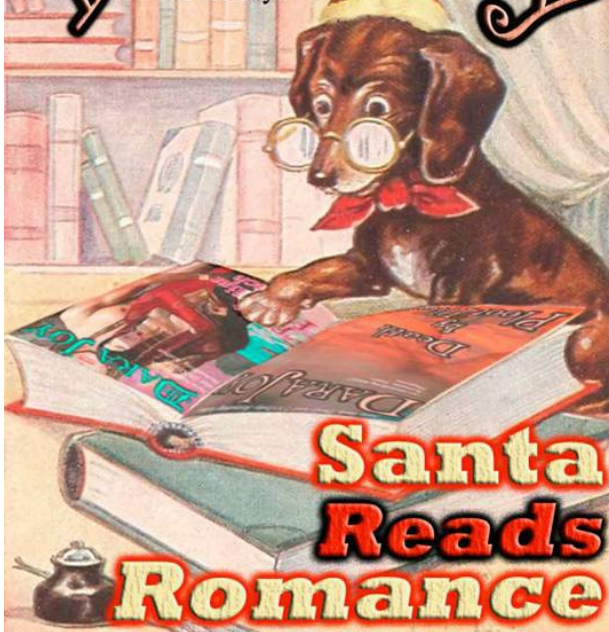
"Pure Joy!"



**Santa
Reads
Romance**

Dara Joy

"Pure Joy!"



**Santa
Reads
Romance**

Santa Reads Romance

Dara Joy

Other titles by Dara Joy:

DEATH BY PLOOT PLOOT
THAT FAMILIAR TOUCH
CAT SCRATCHED
WILDCAT ARROWS
IN KIRKPATRICK'S WOODS
MY ONE
KNIGHT OF A TRILLION STARS
TONIGHT OR NEVER
REJAR
MINE TO TAKE
TASTE OF THE DEVIL

HIGH ENERGY
HIGH INTENSITY
SANTA READS ROMANCE

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First Edition

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Santa Reads Romance

*for WHISKERS
(11/17/81— 3/21/96)*

*Who stood up on his chubby hind
legs and danced
for a scallion ,
Who unlocked every door and
cabinet in my house
simply to prove a point ,
Who bravely captured tie-wraps and
wrestled them to death
with his patented immobilizer ,
Who slept with me when he thought I
wasn't looking ,*

*Who always came when I called his
name
and stayed with me in my darkest
hours ,
Who passed on to loving memory
the day I completed this story.*

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Chapter One

Writers. They were the bane of his existence.

Unfortunately, they were his bread and butter too.

C. Hunter Douglas slammed the heel of his hand against the steering wheel of the rental car. *What came into their strange little minds that caused them to react so... so...*

They had to be from another planet. Probably plants of an alien race, put here to slowly drive the sane mad.

He peered through the windshield into the darkness.

A snow squall had sprung up out of nowhere, adding to his rising irritation. The Weather Channel had conveniently left this piece of information out of its travel report this morning. He should have realized. Maine. Christmas week.

It was a trip only a sailor returning home from war or a desperate publisher would attempt to make.

His hand slammed on the wheel again.

One million dollars.

Of his money.

And no manuscript.

Normally he was not a violent man, but the idea of grabbing the oh-so-talented Rex Stevens by the throat and

slowly squeezing the air from his self-indulgent lungs held great appeal. He'd show the horror writer something really scary. A pissed-off publisher.

What was he going to do?

Publicity and marketing had been set in motion, a book tour ready and waiting, appearances on talk shows, tie-ins... Shit, the whole thing was going to fall apart!

He had counted on this. Placed all of his dwindling profit-margin eggs in Rex's basket of frightening words. His uncle had made some terrible financial decisions; Hunter had been called in to clean up.

Everything would have been nice and tidy if the “writer”— he grimaced at the

word— had delivered as contracted!

When the manuscript had still not arrived three weeks after the deadline, an uncomfortable, nauseous feeling had settled in the pit of his stomach.

It was a feeling he recognized.

Hunter called it his “imminent author sickness.”

He had called the man and his agent several times, leaving message after message. The agent was in the hospital for his ulcers (Hunter bet he knew why), and Rex had not returned his calls.

So Hunter had flown up to Maine.

He would've flown to Timbuktu to get his hands on that manuscript.

Only when he arrived on Rex's doorstep in this godforsaken rural town,

the house keeper had cheerfully
informed him that Mr. Rex was not there.

Mr. Rex was in Sri Lanka.

At an *ashram*.

In search of himself.

Hunter's left eye twitched. *Writers*.

Chapter Two

May threw another log on the fire.

She watched the sparks fly up the chimney as if it were the most interesting sight she had ever seen. Unfortunately, the amazing spectacle was over in less than a minute.

She sighed, wondering what else could suddenly capture her attention. Surely something?

Come to me.

Her green eyes began to cloud over at the subliminal suggestion.

You must come to me...

Her shoulders scrunched up as she tried to fight off the insistent voice.

Get your butt over here!

The damn laptop was trying to get her attention again. It was the voice of conscience and reason. It was the voice of a deadline fast approaching. It would not leave her alone!

May desperately scanned the room, searching for an important task that needed to be done immediately. Perhaps the ceilings needed vacuuming? Never mind that they weren't her ceilings—anything was better than staring at that empty screen.

This was the stupidest idea she had ever had.

And she had had some whoppers.

When her neighbor Billy had told her about his cabin in Maine, May had practically begged him to let her use it for a few weeks. It seemed the ideal hideaway where she would write, diet, and reflect.

The perfect solution.

She could remove herself from the temptations of everyday life, finish her book, and maybe lose a few pounds at the same time.

Most importantly, she would not be surrounded by well-meaning family and friends who smothered her in sympathy invites at Christmas. The holiday that never failed to remind her: a) she was alone; b) she was alone and; c) *she was*

alone.

It was supposed to be “the great escape.” After all, she would be working; she had the perfect excuse to turn down all the invitations.

Everything would be accomplished in one fell swoop.

Only it hadn't quite worked out that way.

Even though Billy had warned her that the cabin was remote, secluded, and had little in the way of conveniences, she had somehow ignored all that, her inner sights focusing on a new and improved May. A May armed with a *completed* novel.

After two days here, she was beginning to question the wisdom of the

plan.

The one-room cabin with kitchenette was starting to get on her nerves.

What ever had possessed her to come here equipped with only a laptop, a sack full of frozen diet dinners, a giant box of Cheerios, and ten pounds of Braeburn apples? What kind of diet was that?

Thankfully, she couldn't bear the thought of giving up coffee cream, so she at least had a small carton of Half-and-Half to stare at and dole out like liquid platinum.

Well, enough suffering! Tomorrow she was going to drive into the little village she had passed on her way to the cabin and lay in some writer's survival supplies. Lots of Chippy Nicks,

Chocomongos, and Jelly Welllys. Her stomach growled agreement with the fine idea.

Seeking security of another kind, her sights went to the overflowing carton in the corner near the fireplace. At least she'd had sense enough to bring her favorite romance novels. She sighed contentedly at the lovely sight. Food she could live without. Creature comforts she could live without. Romance novels, however, were a different story.

Come to think of it, this cabin was the perfect setting for a romance book.

Her imagination took flight. Yes... remote cabin, two strangers thrown together by chance...

She giggled to herself. How often had

she read that particular story line? Too many times. It was the *plot du jour*. Although she had loved so many of those stories....

A few snowflakes fell softly against the windowpane.

Her brow furrowed. She hadn't heard anything about snow this morning on the radio. Probably just a small snow shower.

Shrugging, she threw another log on the fire and avidly watched the sparks fly up the chimney.

That's another minute down.

Chapter Three

Perhaps if his mind hadn't been wandering along the lines of throttling his favorite author, he would've noticed the man sooner.

He had just turned down the main street of the town. The snow had picked up in the last fifteen minutes, although visibility wasn't that bad. He should've seen him.

Even though it was just past eight in the evening, the streets were deserted. It seemed as though one moment it was

clear sailing, and the next a surprised visage materialized in front of his windshield, followed by a sickening thump.

Christ! He had hit somebody!

Hunter slammed on the brakes, sweat breaking out across his forehead. The car skidded to a stop, but Hunter was already out the door while the car was still rocking.

A red lump lay unmoving in the gutter. He ran to the huddled shape, falling to his knees in the shallow snow. Hunter had never been so scared in his life.

The man was dressed in a Santa suit.

Next to him, lying on the pavement, was a large sack full of presents. If possible, Hunter felt even worse. He had

run over Santa Claus! Not even a disgruntled publisher would intentionally do that.

“Talk to me!” Gently he placed his hand on the man's shoulder. “I didn't even see you there, pop, I swear it! Hey, buddy, say something, please! Are you hurt bad?”

Leaning over, he worked his palm under the man's shirt to feel for a heartbeat. Something wet licked his hand.

“Jesus!” Hunter fell back in the snow. What the hell was that?

A piteous groan came from under the prone figure. It did not sound human.

Hunter blanched. He had read too many of Rex's books lately— they

always seemed to involve horrific happenings in the backwoods of Maine...

“Don't just sit there gawking at me, boyo! Help me up!”

The acerbic words penetrated Hunter's fog-brain. He let out a sigh of relief. At least the man was conscious and speaking.

“You okay, mister? Maybe you shouldn't move.”

“And how am I supposed to be gettin' up if I don't move? C'mon now, help ol' Santa up. Benny's not happy.”

Against his better judgment, Hunter crawled toward the man, helping him to sit up. A wave of cheap gin assailed his nostrils.

Uh-huh. The picture was getting clearer. The old coot had probably fallen into the path of his car in a drunken stupor. Idly Hunter wondered what Benny was supposed to be a euphemism for. As if he needed to know.

“Santa” sat up, swaying slightly, his eyes round and bleary. He shook his head several times, slapped the back of his head twice, and hiccuped.

Hunter viewed him askance. “Are—are you sure you're okay, old-timer?”

“Fit as a fiddle. It's Benny took the brunt of it, poor little fellow.”

Hunter winced. Yeah, the old coot had probably landed right on his... well, he'd never heard it called a *benny* before. “Ah, yah, must've hurt like hell.

Sorry.”

The man looked at him reproachfully. “And him being such a tiny little thing.”

Hunter stared at him. He blinked. What could he say to that? He rubbed his forehead. “Hey, you know, cold weather and all...”

Santa raised one bushy eyebrow and, shaking his head, muttered under his breath. It sounded suspiciously like “twit.”

The old coot seemed okay. Drunk as a skunk, but okay. Impatiently, Hunter looked at his watch. He had a flight leaving from Bangor in a little over three hours and this was one flight he did not want to miss. The sooner he exited this horror-hotel the better; so far the trip had

been one long nightmare.

Besides, the chances of him getting another flight out tonight during Christmas week were probably five trillion to one. Conservatively speaking.

“Well, if you're sure you're all right...”

“I told ya, lad, I'm fine.”

Nodding, Hunter turned and started to walk back to his car, missing the old man's surprised look. He had just reached the driver's door when an ear-splitting yell pierced the night, shattering Hunter's ear drums.

“Me leg! I can't move me leg!”

Hunter raced back to him, face pale. “You are hurt! Don't worry, I have a cell phone in the car. I'll go call an

ambulance. Stay put—I'll be right back
—”

“I ain't getting into no meat wagon!”
the voice wailed indignantly.

“But you—”

“You'll take me then, won't ya,
sonny?” Santa looked at him slyly.

Hunter sighed. He was being sucker-
punched and there wasn't a damn thing
he could do about it. “All right.”

The old coot grinned. “Put your hands
out so I can give ya Benny.”

Hunter's eyes widened. He stepped
back. Three steps.

“Now, there's nothing to be afraid of.
Benny's real friendly. I'm sure you're
going to be very fond of him—”

“The hell you say!” Hunter took

another step back.

Santa clicked his tongue and rolled his eyes heavenward as if asking for divine interference. Reaching into his voluminous velvet shirt, he extracted a small reddish-brown bundle of fur with floppy ears. A blue bow was tied around its neck.

A puppy. Benny was a puppy. I've been living in New York too long, Hunter concluded. He tentatively reached down and took the little guy from the man.

The puppy immediately licked his hand. Then, wagging his wispy tail, he looked up at Hunter with big brown eyes.

Cute little tyke. Unconsciously, he

petted the dog's head. "Nice puppy," he murmured distractedly. He had never been around dogs much. "What kind of dog is this?"

"That there's a genuine long-haired dachshund. Don't see too many of them dogs about. Kinda special, they are. Benny's being relocated."

"Relocated?"

"His old family didn't treat him none too well, poor mite. And him being the fine dog he is."

Hunter stroked the soft little head.

"Too bad. How old is he?"

"About a year old."

Hunter was surprised. "I thought he was just a puppy."

"He is; always will be. That's the

magic of some dogs,” he confided before hiccuping drunkenly.

Hunter looked at him askance. “Ah, yah. Do you need a hand up?”

“Probably. But ya need to take me bag first.” He nodded to the sack lying near him on the snowy pavement.

Hunter quirked his brow. “Let me guess, gifts to be dispensed?”

“Right ya are, boyo. I was headed to the children's home before ya ran me down like some no-account slug in the gutter.” He speared him with a pointed look from beneath bushy brows.

“Now wait just a minute, old-timer, you—”

“The bag, sonny.”

Letting out a hiss of disgust, Hunter

retrieved the huge sack of wrapped gifts, throwing it onto the back seat of his car. Then he helped the old coot into the front seat, almost passing out from the alcohol fumes.

He wondered if it would affect him like secondary smoke in the closed confines of the automobile.

The way his day had been going? Absolutely.

He could see it now. He would get pulled over by the Maine police and get arrested for secondary drunk driving, and while he was hauled away, he would babble pitiful phrases about million-dollar advances and an *ashram* in Sri Lanka.

Hunter decided he definitely needed a

vacation.

“You'll just have to do it, boyo!”

“Santa” lay on the hospital bed, propped up by three pillows and surrounded by four pretty nurses. Never mind that the ER doctor could find nothing wrong with the old coot. For a man supposedly in pain, he seemed remarkably comfortable. And smug.

Go figure, but the young women couldn't do too much for the guy. Even his white beard looked as if it had the snarls combed out of it.

Hunter's brow furrowed. Odd how the man had seemed to sober up as soon as they entered the emergency room. Even the noxious alcohol fumes had mysteriously disappeared.

In response, the corner of Hunter's mouth lifted in a semblance of a sarcastic grin. "I don't think so, pop. I got a plane to catch."

A screech of utter despair filled the room. "Aw, the children! How will they get their gifts? *The chi-i-l-l-dren!*"

The pitiful wail of anguish bounced off the green walls, causing the four nurses to cross their arms over their ample chests in unison and level looks of utter disdain at Hunter.

He felt like a first-class heel.

He tried to explain. "Look, I have to get back to New—"

Santa stopped in mid-wail to pin him to the spot. "Ya can still make yer plane! Won't take but fifteen minutes! Ya told

me on the drive ain't no family waitin' home for ya anyway. Think of the children... ”

“Well, I... ” Hunter could feel himself caving in. How could he refuse? And live with himself. Just because he was alone and didn't have anyone to share Christmas with was no reason to be a Grinch. As long as he still made his plane, that is.

The old codger knew the instant he had won. He pointed to the red velvet suit draped over the chair next to the bed.

This was where C. Hunter Douglas drew the line. “Absolutely not, pop.”

A petite red-haired nurse joined in. “Oh, but you can't deliver the gifts to

those poor children not dressed as Santa! That would be even worse than no gifts at all.”

Santa nodded vehemently in agreement.

Dammit. He might as well just do it and get it over with. Maybe then he could get out of this godforsaken town! Anything was better than those five sets of dog-eyes staring at him. Make that six including Benny, who had started up a soulful whine in chorus.

He stormed over to the chair and grabbed the velvet suit.

“What about your beard?” the red-headed nurse asked.

“What about it?” he snapped.

“Well, you don't have one! The hat

will cover your hair, but the beard... I've got it!" She snapped her fingers. "I'll make you one from some cotton batting and surgical thread."

"Good idea, Rudy." Santa praised the nurse's ingenuity.

She smiled broadly. "I'll be right back."

"I can hardly wait," Hunter muttered under his breath.

Hunter started to put the mangy outfit on over his Armani suit, came to his senses, and headed for the cubicle bathroom. When he exited all in red, his business suit was draped carefully over his arm.

"I never realized how fine I look in that suit." The old-timer on the bed

grinned wickedly at him. He was really enjoying this.

Hunter narrowed his silver eyes. The daunting effect was somewhat spoiled when the pom-pom at the end of the hat smacked into his nose.

“Here we go!” Nurse Rudy raced back into the room with a fluffy wad of cotton attached to a string. “Bend down and I’ll tie it on for you.”

Hunter knelt his tall frame so she could tie it behind his ears. She began stuffing his wavy dark brown hair under the rim of the hat. “Can’t let the kids see this. You know, I have some scissors in my pocket; I could trim it off...”

“No!” Hunter abruptly stood.

Walking over to a small square mirror

on the wall, he peered at his new high-powered image. “I look like a cross between a sheep's butt and a horse's behind.”

The nurses giggled.

Santa stroked his beard. “I will admit ya don't carry it off with quite the same flair I do.”

Hunter faced him. “You can have the job back any time, pop.”

The man's eyes twinkled. “Right ya are, sonny! Now, here's the directions to the place; I wrote them down for ya.” He handed him a heavily scrawled piece of paper.

Hunter scanned it. “Are you sure this is close by; it seems—”

“Country roads. Don't worry about

that none, just follow those directions exactly and ya won't have no problem.”

Hunter stuffed the note in his pocket. Then he hoisted the heavy sack over his broad shoulder. “Well, see ya later, Santa. It's been... interesting.”

“Wait a minute!” Hunter turned around. The codger held the puppy out to him. “Ya forgot Benny.”

Hunter sighed resignedly, putting out his hand for the dog.

“He don't like the cold much!” Santa yelled after him.

Hunter waved acknowledgment without turning around.

Before he left the hospital he scooted the dog safely inside his shirt.

Chapter Four

Turkeyfoote Road.

Where in the hell was Turkeyfoote Road?

It seemed as if he'd been driving for hours, although his watch claimed it was only about thirty minutes.

He had left the outskirts of the village twenty minutes ago. The snowfall had picked up considerably; his wipers were just keeping up with it. If he didn't find the turn-off soon, he was going to turn back, drop off the gifts and Benny. The

small dog was still nestled next to his chest, refusing to leave the warmth of his shirt.

At this pace, he might miss his plane. And he still had to drive to Bangor. These dark country roads were—

A small wooden sign staked to the ground seesawed in the wind to his left. It was placed next to— not a road exactly, more a trail.

On the front of the wooden sign someone had drawn in red paint what one might assume was a turkey foot.

It was a good enough indication for him.

He swung the car to the left and followed the narrow rutted pathway. After ten minutes of bouncing and sliding

on the dirt track, he wondered what had possessed him to take that turn.

The snow was falling fast and furious now.

He had just decided to turn back when he rounded a bend and spotted some lights in the distance. About 300 yards up the road a house sat on a hill. It was too dark and snowy to see much of its shape, but Hunter had no doubt that it was the children's home. He had followed the directions exactly.

Unfortunately, at that point the road became steeper and rougher. In this snow, without four-wheel drive, he didn't think he'd be able to drive much further. The surface was slick and pitted with ice.

Deciding it was best to walk the remaining distance—he wasn't going to take any chances of getting stuck here—he stopped the car, grabbed the sack from the back seat, tucked Benny's head back in his shirt, and headed up to the house.

Chapter Five

The lights flickered and went out.

May peered out the window. The storm was really picking up. Earlier she had tried to tune in a local radio station on her iPod Nano but all she got was static. Reception hadn't been the best these past few days, and she supposed with this snow...

The firelight cast eerie shadows on the walls.

She swallowed. This was creepy. She had never done anything like this before.

Why, oh why, had she come here by herself?

The wind howled outside. An eerie sonata.

Billy had told her there was a generator in the cellar, but she didn't have the foggiest idea how to use it. And even if she could use it, there was no way she was going down in that dirt cellar by herself in the dark! It was a *Tales from the Crypt* waiting to happen.

She would just scrunch close to the fireplace all night and hope she didn't freeze. It seemed to be doing a fairly good job of keeping the room warm. And she had plenty of firewood.

Tomorrow she was going to go back home.

May had had all she could stand of the little hideaway.

She wanted TV, phone, CD-Rom, and home delivery.

This was the last time she would... She leaned closer to the window. *Was something moving out there?*

A fuzzy blur of staggered movement seemed to weave its way through the snow. May gulped. *Something was out there.*

Oh, God.

Her rapid breath fogged up the glass. Quickly she wiped the pane with a circular motion of her palm. She did not want to lose sight of it!

Squinting, she tried to get a better view through the heavily falling snow.

It was big, what ever it was.

It— it seemed to have a... huge *hump* on its back!

Oh, God. A thin film of sweat dotted her brow.

As the figure got closer, she could discern the shape of a man. This was not necessarily comforting.

May stood on tiptoe to watch his progress through the storm, taking solace from the fact that he seemed to be having considerable trouble negotiating the pathway to the cabin. He kept slipping and sliding on the icy walkway.

When he got close enough so that the firelight from the window illuminated him better, May put her hand to her throat in utter terror. It was all she could

do not to scream out loud. *He was wearing a Santa suit!*

There was no doubt in her mind now that he was a homicidal maniac. There had been a very popular slasher movie where the killer had done the exact same thing. What better way to sucker in your victims than dressing as kindly old Santa?

May thought she was going to be sick.

He was making his way to the front porch now. She could hear the heavy fall of his uncoordinated feet dragging across the wooden planks.

Thinking quickly, she grabbed a hefty piece of firewood and stood behind the door. Her best chance would be in taking him unawares. She knew this

because she was an author who was
very good at plotting.

Carefully she inched over and
unlocked the door.

And waited like a spider.

Chapter Six

Hunter hefted the sack on his shoulder and went to knock on the door. He had been surprised at how small the house—no, cabin—was when it came into better view. How many children could live here? It seemed kind of primitive...

The door creaked slowly open.

Placing the sack down on the porch, Hunter gingerly stepped forward. “Hello?” No answer. He crossed the threshold. “Anybody here? I’m deliver —”

Something whacked him hard on the back of the head.

Hunter went down like a ton of bricks.

He was thinking he was the biggest fool of all time just before the world went black.

Chapter Seven

*Got him! May slammed the door shut.
No sense letting out the warm air.*

She ran into the kitchenette looking for the ball of twine she had spotted when she first arrived and was putting away her groceries. Grabbing it off the nail on the inside of the sink cabinet, she raced back into the main room, hoping the maniac hadn't come to yet.

There he was! Lying on his stomach just where she had left him— looking like a beached red whale.

May made short work of tying his hands behind his back. Then she wrapped the twine around his feet, which surprisingly were not clad in black Santa boots, but in rather expensive-looking brown leather shoes. His socks were soaked through, but she didn't feel the least sympathy for him or his wet feet.

May had him trussed up like a Christmas turkey in no time flat.

Now that he wasn't going anywhere without her approval, she felt confident enough to roll the scoundrel over.

She first noted that his dark lashes (which were rather long for a man) framed cheeks that looked rather pale even through his tan-colored skin. He

appeared younger than she originally thought. At first glance in that suit, she had taken him for a man in his fifties. Now she saw that he was probably only in his early to mid thirties.

Which made him all the more dangerous.

Removing his stocking hat, she was surprised at the mass of luxuriant wavy brown hair that fell over her hands. It wasn't to his shoulders, but close to it, falling a few inches shorter in a tapered cut.

She hadn't seen his entire face yet, but so far he was exceedingly nice-looking. May shook her head in disgust. *Now, why would a man who looked like this have to resort to being a fiend?*

Maybe he was a moron.

That really had a tendency to turn women off.

His fake beard was slightly askew. Carefully she removed the fuzzy beard, frowning as it fell apart in her hands. It looked like he had just taken some cotton balls and threaded them through a string! What a pervert!

Her mouth parted slightly as she caught her first glimpse of his completely unmasked face.

It held to the original promise, revealing a strong chin— which no doubt indicated a pugnacious streak— a classically straight nose neither too large nor too small, and well-shaped lips. The bottom lip, she noted absently, was

slightly fuller than the top; the indentation below it hinting at a sensual... no, she wouldn't even think it.

He looked... familiar somehow.

Now that his whole face was visible, May noted that his tan skin did have a palish cast to it.

Maybe she had whacked him a bit too hard?

Not that she'd had a choice! Still... she couldn't stand to see any living thing suffer; even if the living thing was a maniac.

Gingerly she placed her palms on either side of his face, lifting his head a few inches off the floor.

His skin was a bit clammy, too, but he seemed to be breathing fine.

The man gave a slight moan and his lashes fluttered. Slowly his eyes opened, trying to focus on her.

May caught sight of those silver eyes and instantly recognized him.

“*You!*” She dropped his head like a hot potato.

It hit the wooden floor with a clunk.

The man's startled groan was cut off as he passed out again.

Oh, great! She had just beaned and trussed up C. Hunter Douglas, wunderkind and vice-president of Fortuna Books! Should do wonders for her career.

What on earth was he doing here?

Obviously, he had come to see her, but why? May bit her lip. Wait a

minute... her first book had done remarkably well. There was a rumor going around that Fortuna was looking into starting up a romance line. That's it! Somehow he had found out she was here, probably from her agent, and had come up here to woo her away from her present publisher.

Well, it wouldn't work!

She was very happy where she was. Besides, this was rather *nervy* of him, intruding into her solitude. During Christmas. Publishers!

He would have to stay here until the morning (especially since he was out cold on her floor), but come morning he could just pick himself up and leave!

In the meantime, May thought it best to

untie him.

She rolled him over, unwrapped his hands, then flipped him back. It wasn't easy—the man seemed to be six feet plus of solid muscle. Apparently, wrestling writers to the ground like heifers from a shoot on a regular basis did wonders for toning the body.

Better check his breathing. She grimaced, reaching inside his shirt to place her palm over his heart.

Something licked her fingers. May screamed.

“Ahhh!” She fell backward on the floor.

A small furry head poked out of the red velvet, tongue lolling.

A puppy! Her face lit up with a huge

grin at the sight of the silly-looking thing. Until she realized that Mr. Douglas had probably counted on such a reaction from her. The nerve! Using a sweet animal to get under her defenses.

Now that she knew his game, she would be totally immune.

The small dog wiggled out from his host's garment, shaking his body in an attempt to smooth out his fur. The action only caused the silky strands to fly in every direction with static electricity. He looked at her and grinned.

Awww... May melted completely.

“C'mere, boy!” The dog trotted over to her with a frisky step. “Aren't you the sweetest wittle fellow?” She rubbed the soft face, and his small, wispy tail

thumped on the floor.

He was the cutest little wiener dog! She was a goner; already she was speaking baby-talk to him. When a person did that with an animal, the animal knew he had you. Didn't matter if it was a cat or a dog, they all gave you that same smug look which said quite clearly, "personal sucker."

"Let me check on your owner and then I'll see about you." Leaning over Douglas again, she placed her hand over his chest, feeling the steady thump thump thump of his heart.

Then she opened his eyelids to check his pupils. They were slightly dilated, but he didn't seem too bad off.

In any case, she had no telephone to

call for help. There was a radio in the cellar, but she hadn't had any reason to use it before this and doubted she could find and work it in the dark. Besides, the electricity was out.

She figured Douglas would sleep the night through and wake up in the morning with a gargantuan headache and a temper to match.

The best she could do was keep an eye on him throughout the night.

Chapter Eight

May was really starting to get worried.

She had sat on the bed watching the publisher all night. The temperature in the cabin had soon plummeted with the heaters not working.

She had put on her heavy coat and, knowing it had to be freezing on the floor, had rolled him in the bed quilt.

It had not been an easy task.

She practically had to sweep him around the whole floor like a human

rolling pin before she could get him situated on the quilt properly.

After that, the dog had sat up near the foot of her bed, and with his stubby paws waving madly, begged her to pick him up. As soon as she did, he dived under her coat for warmth and had not come out since.

Of course, the up side was that he was also acting as a small hot water bottle for her.

Her gaze went worriedly to the windows. It had been snowing steadily all night; in fact, it was a downright blizzard. The wind had picked up at around midnight, shaking the rafters and lending a weird howling sound to the scene.

Even though Douglas couldn't exactly be considered company, especially since he was still out cold, May was almost glad for his bizarre intrusion. At least she wasn't alone in this storm. Not that she would ever admit that she was even remotely pleased with the man's intrusion.

Around dawn, he finally regained consciousness with a loud, protesting groan.

Sitting up, he rubbed the back of his head, silver eyes narrowing slightly when he came across the goose egg on the back of his head.

She must have made a slight sound, because his head snapped up.

The action caused him to wince. He

watched her for a few moments silently. When he spoke, his words reflected his anger.

“If this is some type of kidnapping scheme, you can tell your accomplice with the white beard it won't work. I plan on—”

May cut him off. “*Kidnapping scheme?* You've got to be kidding! *You* came here, Mr. Douglas. Completely uninvited, I might add. And you can just forget your little ploy to win me over!”

Hunter squinted his eyes, fighting down a wave of nausea from his throbbing head. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Don't you remember me, Mr. Douglas? You came here to see me.” He

examined her face. A little too long. Her black hair was a snarled mass around her shoulders.

“Honey, I'm sure I would remember someone who looked like you.”

She made a face at him.

“If you're not trying to kidnap me, why did you hit me on the head? And where are the kids?”

He wasn't making any sense. Uh-oh. Maybe she *had* conked him too hard.

“Kids?” she asked tentatively.

“Yeah, the kids. I brought them their Christmas gifts just like your friend asked.”

“I don't think so. You came here to see me.”

He stopped rubbing the back of his

head to stare at her, disbelieving. None of this made any sense. Which meant he was either concussed or he was dealing with a... He didn't want to think of the possibility. "I did?"

She nodded. The bump on his head was probably making him foggy. "I'm a writer," she proudly informed him.

Hunter closed his eyes and groaned. Better he was concussed. He had to be cursed. He was certainly in the wrong place.

"Look, I don't know how this happened but I ran over Santa Claus last night and—"

May snorted. "Did you skin him before or after you 'bagged' him?" She let her gaze travel insultingly up and

down his body, letting him know her opinion of his attire.

Hunter tried to explain. "He made me deliver some gifts for him to the children, so I had to—"

She held up her hand. "Please. Don't embarrass yourself further."

He opened his mouth to respond; she cut him off.

"The point is, Mr. Douglas, you've wasted your time. I'm perfectly happy with my present publisher. I'm really sorry about the bump on your head, but what did you expect? Sneaking up on a writer in the Maine woods was not very smart. I can't imagine you've had much success with the technique."

He stared at her dumbfounded. "Do

you actually believe I—”

“After all, this is my retreat, my *ashram*...” She stopped speaking because his eyes had suddenly thinned into two silver slits.

“What did you say?” His voice had gone dangerously soft.

“Um, never mind.” May ran her fingers through her tangled hair.

“Who the hell *are* you?”

“You know—” she began.

“Humor me.”

“May Forrester. Well, that's the name you would know me by.”

The name did not register. “Sorry,” he said with a shrug.

Hunter threw off the quilt, attempting to stand. The room swirled around him,

and he grabbed at the bedpost to steady himself.

“Hey, go easy!” May reached over to steady him. “You’ve had quite a bang on your head.”

He opened one eye and glared at her. “Just what did you hit me with?”

May swallowed guiltily. Not that she believed his fumbling explanation. For what other reason would he be here? “A piece of firewood,” she admitted quietly.

“Mmm. Pine or oak?”

“Oak,” she mumbled.

He rubbed his throbbing temples. “I thought so.”

“Look, I’ll go make us some coffee. Maybe that will help your headache. It’s

not as if we can go anywhere.” She gestured to the windows.

He looked at her, then let his gaze travel to the windows. Snow was blowing against the glass. He crossed the room in three strides to see what was going on out there.

The view was not encouraging. It was a real “nor’easter.” Already drifts were over four feet high and rising.

He turned back to her, an expression akin to horror on his handsome face. “Are you telling me I’m snowbound in a cabin with a... a... *writer*?”

Like she was a leper or something! May crossed her arms. “As if you didn’t plan this! You knew very well what you were doing. I’m not happy about it, but

since I'm stuck with you for the time being, I suppose I'll have to make the best of it." With that she turned and headed for the small kitchenette.

It was starting already. He had no idea what she was talking about. And why should he? She was one of *those*. There was no sense trying to reason with her; this he knew from experience. *A writer.* His left eye twitched.

He suddenly remembered something. *Where was the dog?*

Had he somehow dropped him on the porch before she whacked him? *Oh, no.* The little fella never would have made it through the storm last night. "Benny!"

Sick to his stomach, Hunter ran to the front door, only to stop short when she

called over her shoulder, “If you mean this adorable puppy here, he's all right. In fact, he's still burrowed under my coat. But I warn you, he won't help your cause.”

Hunter let out a sigh of relief. If anything had happened to the little guy...

He shivered, suddenly realizing how cold it was in here. Now that he was up and walking, every part of his body fairly screamed in soreness. Strange, but he felt as though he had been rolled across a rough floor all night, then left to stiffen on it.

“Why is it so cold in here?” he called out in the direction of the kitchenette.

“Electricity went out last night. The cabin's heated by electric baseboard,

and even when it is working it's none too hot in here. How do you like your coffee?"

"Black." He walked over to the firewood piled by the fireplace. "Is this all the firewood you have?" There was concern in his voice.

"No, there's plenty of cut wood in the cellar."

"I hope it's enough so we don't freeze to death."

May ignored the "we". "There is a generator down there, but I haven't had a chance to look at it yet." She walked into the room and handed him a mug of coffee. He sipped the brew gratefully, letting the steam hit his face.

"I'll have a look at it when I finish my

coffee. Phone out, too?”

“There is no phone.”

He stared at her incredulously. “You came out here by yourself, a woman alone, to a secluded place that has no access to a telephone? What if there was an emergency?”

The formulaic expression he wore was one she was becoming familiar with; it said, “writer = alien species.”

“I never thought of that—I just wanted some solitude.” She gave him a pointed look. “So I could write. I told you, this was to be my *ashram*.”

He shuddered, holding up his palm. “Please, not before breakfast.”

What was that supposed to mean? May wasn't sure she liked C. Hunter

Douglas.

“I have a cell phone in my car. It'll need a charge, but it should be fine.”

“And how do you propose to get this cell phone? Have you looked outside lately?”

“As soon as it stops snowing, I'll make my way to the car.”

May calmly took a sip of coffee. Typical New York businessman! Ignoring the small matter of four-foot drifts, hurricane-strength winds, and white-out conditions. If she didn't know better, she would have taken him for an agent.

“And where exactly is this car of yours parked?” she asked calmly.

He rubbed his ear. “About three

hundred yards down the road.”

“Uh-huh.” She took another sip of coffee. “I have news for you, Attila, I managed to get a station on my iPod Nano last night for all of fifteen minutes, but I did hear words to the effect of ‘storm of the century,’ ninety-mile-per-hour winds, and something in the range of three and a half feet of snow.”

Hunter was surprised. “This wasn't predicted.”

“They never are. Apparently this baby went out to sea, picked up a ton of moisture, and headed back inland. The weathermen were going bonkers, from what I heard.”

He ran his hand distractedly through his hair. “Dammit! I need to get out of

here today. I have to get to Sri Lanka!”

May eyed him strangely. “Uh-huh. Are you sure you're feeling all right? How many fingers do I have up?” May wasn't holding any fingers up.

“Don't be cute. Since it seems we're both stuck here for the time being, how are we set for supplies?”

There was that “we” business again. “There's plenty to eat. More than enough for two.” For the amount of time *he* would be here. Wisely, May kept that thought to herself.

Apparently C. Hunter Douglas wasn't going to take her estimation of the subject; he stormed off to the cubicle kitchen and began slamming cabinet doors open and shut. “Where are your

food supplies? All I see here is this bag of apples.”

“Try the refrigerator.”

He opened up the fridge and found a box of Cheerios and a carton of Half-and-Half. He frowned. “Why do you have Cheerios in the refrigerator?”

“Just in case.” This was relayed with the utmost seriousness.

Coming from New York City, Hunter understood. One could never be too careful until one checked out the premises. Uninvited surprises rustling over the breakfast cereal had a tendency to remove one's appetite.

He opened the freezer.

A row of Tiny Cuisine boxes greeted him.

He rubbed the bridge of his nose.
Great. Diet food.

“There's not enough here for one person to eat. Tell me this is not all the food you have here.”

“Okay, I won't.”

May reached past him, opening the refrigerator to remove the box of cereal. Getting a small bowl for Benny, she poured the dachshund a bowl, moistening it with a little water and a drop of Half-and-Half. The dog eagerly began consuming, his small tail wagging happily.

“We probably should save the cereal for him.”

That left the diet food. Hunter grimaced; his stomach was already

growling. He grabbed an apple off the counter. "I'll go check out that generator. See what you can pick up on your radio."

May crossed her arms over her chest. Why do men feel they can barge in anywhere and start giving orders? As if she would pay heed to a man talking to her in a red velvet suit! "Excuse me, but there's something you seem to have forgotten."

Hunter paused at the head of the cellar stairs. "What's that?"

"This is *my* rental cabin—*you* are the intruder."

He raised one eyebrow. "Meaning?"

"Meaning I'll give the orders around here."

He exhaled. "I see." He leaned against the door jamb and, imitating her, crossed his arms over his chest.

May had to admit that, of the two of them, he probably looked the more authoritative.

"And what, pray tell, are your 'orders'?"

She notched her chin challengingly in the air. "I'll go check the generator and you listen to the radio." She wanted to slap her own face. *Why had she said that?* She *really* did not want to go in that creepy cellar. She tried to look brave.

Hunter grinned slowly. It was clear the woman did not want to go down there. She was rather cute... If only she

weren't one of *them*. “Okay, green eyes, I'll check the generator while you listen to the radio.”

“Right.” She nodded briskly as if that were what she had actually said.

He whistled all the way down the stairs.

Which made May realize that C. Hunter Douglas was going to prove to be the irritating type.

Chapter Nine

It had taken him a couple of hours, but C. Hunter Douglas had gotten the old generator working, which moved him up considerably in May's estimation.

He had also managed to drag up the cumbersome radio from the cellar, placing it on the countertop in the kitchen. He had worked on the radio as well, with some rusty tools he had found down there.

May was impressed. She had figured him for a man who never saw the outside

walls of an office and therefore assumed he would have no mechanical ability.

When she jokingly told him this, he smiled faintly. “I sometimes suffer from insomnia and often turn on a do-it-yourself cable station in the middle of the night, hoping it will knock me out. It hasn't cured my insomnia, but I have learned how to plant an asparagus bed, put up dry wall, wire an enclosed porch, decorate with style on a shoestring, and cook a Cornish game hen.”

He paused, then added, “I hate Cornish game hens. They look like diminutive pigeons.”

May chuckled, the word “diminutive” reminding her that they hadn't eaten the Tiny Cuisine yet. She offered to heat up

their meals in the small microwave she had brought with her.

Hunter continued to fiddle with the radio. They both were surprised when a burst of static blasted the kitchen.

“It's working!” May beamed at him.

Douglas wore the expression most men wore when they'd managed to repair something. It was a look of demure caveman cockiness. May had often considered the look just short of a gorilla beating its chest.

Women never displayed that look when they did something considered traditionally “female”! Like managing to feed a family of five on a blue-collar budget. Now, there was an accomplishment!

She could just imagine a woman taking her masterpiece of a tuna casserole out of the oven, placing it on the table, only to throw back her shoulders and beat her chest with her fists while letting out a victorious Tarzan yell.

Her humorous fantasy was interrupted by a now familiar male voice angrily yelling into the radio receiver.

“What do you mean, a week? I can't stay here that long! I'm a publisher!”

Apparently Douglas had reached the sheriff's office in town.

The radio crackled and a tired-sounding voice responded, “Look pal, haven't you been listening to me? It's still snowing out there! And it's going to be

snowing for the next two days. The whole Northeast has been paralyzed by this storm. We can't even keep up with the emergencies.”

“This *is* an emergency! I have to get a manuscript!” Douglas started ranting about a million dollars and Sri Lanka, and May was sure the guy on the other end had chalked him up as New York City looney-tunes.

“Hey! Hey!” the guy was getting really irritated. “You have shelter and food and you're in no immediate danger — that's all I care about. I know where you are. In order to get you out of there, we're going to need some heavy equipment which I can't supply right now. I've got people in desperate

situations all over the county. The roads are impassable. So you can just sit tight and wait.” The man ended the transmission.

May banged Hunter's tray of food on the table.

“Congratulations, Mr. Congeniality. We should be dug out of here by next spring!”

Hunter roughly pulled his chair out, seating himself. “It wasn't my fault! He...” His gaze went to the food in front of him. A spoonful of rice. Two half-dollar-size slices of turkey swimming in a cup of brown water meant to be gravy. “Where's the rest of this?”

Even though she secretly agreed with

him, had even been planning on getting some real food, there was no way she was going to admit the deficiencies of the meal to him. Better he think she was a woman with an agenda who stuck to her plans! Otherwise there would be no end to the complaining.

“That's it,” she loftily informed him, making her voice sound slightly disdainful as if there were nothing lacking in her choice of fare. “And since it looks like we're going to be stuck here together for a week, we have to go easy on this stuff.”

She licked the edge of her fork. “Eat up.”

She remembered a cartoon in which Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and Goofy

all sat down at an elegantly dressed table, complete with overhanging chandelier. Unfortunately, they had nothing to eat except one bean, which Mickey made a great show of slicing into see-thru-thin slices, placing one slice on each plate. Donald Duck watched Mickey silently, his temper slowly reaching the boiling point until suddenly he erupted. Pulling the feathers out of his head, he squawked his head off as he swung upside down from the chandelier.

C. Hunter Douglas had that same look on his face right now.

So she was surprised when, after he clenched and unclenched his fists several times, he quietly picked up his

fork.

He took a bite of rice. “Not only is there nothing to eat here, but it tastes lousy.”

May shrugged off the critique. “Dieters can't be choosers.”

Hunter's silver gaze skimmed her figure. “Why are you dieting? You look fine to me.”

She put down her fork in exasperation. “I have a deadline!”

Hunter stared at her unblinking for several moments. “And A is to B as C is to... ?”

“Oh, you wouldn't understand.”

“Try me.” He swallowed both slices of turkey in one gulp.

“It's sort of all tied in with a sense of

accomplishment.”

Hunter gestured at her with his fork. “It shouldn't be. I have never understood why women feel they have to starve themselves scrawny to feel good about themselves.”

“I hardly starve myself, as you can see!”

Hunter's eyes twinkled. “Which makes it all the more confusing as to why you only brought these minuscule dinners with you.”

Her cheeks flamed. She thought he might be insulting her but she wasn't sure. “Are you saying what I think you're saying?”

He smiled, revealing two curved dimples. “No, I am not.” He let his gaze

travel over her again, lingering on her rounded hips and full breasts. She really was a lovely woman. Now that his head wasn't pounding so bad, he was beginning to see some advantage to his situation.

“Just the opposite,” he murmured.

Now she did blush. May reached for a glass of water rather shakily. He had better behave himself or he was going to get locked in the fruit cellar with Norman Bates's mother.

Hunter tossed his plastic dinner tray onto the floor for Benny, who gratefully licked up the soupy gravy.

“That won't upset his stomach, will it?”

“Nah. Dogs can eat anything.”

“Are you sure? I now he's your dog, but—”

“He's not my dog. He was one of the gifts I—”

“Uh-huh. And how did you know I would even want a dog?”

Hunter sighed. There was no sense trying to explain that to her again. He stood, grabbing two apples off the table. “I'm going to scoop out a place for our friend here. I'm sure he needs to go. The back stoop isn't too bad because of the overhang; it'll have to do. C'mon, Benny.” The dachshund trotted after Douglas, something akin to hero worship in his eyes.

C. Hunter Douglas might say that dog does not belong to him, May thought, but

the wiener believed otherwise.

Chapter Ten

By late that afternoon May wanted to murder him.

In fact, she began to think up ways to do it.

She closed her eyes as he paced by the back of her chair for the thousandth time. He had been pacing for hours. Admittedly, there wasn't much for him to do—there was no TV, her radio wasn't picking up any stations, and there was no phone for “business chats.” It was obvious that C. Hunter Douglas was

completely at a loss.

She clenched her jaw at his next pass. “Mr. Douglas, *please!* I'm trying to work here.”

“It's Hunter.” He stopped pacing suddenly. “Hey, do you have any games on that laptop?”

She gritted her teeth. “No. Just word processing. As in manuscript.”

He groaned, clutching his stomach. “Don't mention that word to me, it's making my stomach hurt.”

“You don't think it could be the six apples you ate?” she said wryly.

He paused to look at her. “You think?” he asked seriously.

She smiled at the boyish expression. “It's a distinct possibility. You better lay

off them, Hunter.”

“I'm starving!”

“Oh, stop complaining! You'd have to pay a spa three thousand bucks a week for the same treatment you'll be getting here for free, and all they would add to the plate would be a little radicchio.”

He threw her a dirty look.

“Don't think about it.”

“And what would you suggest I do to take my mind off it?” His glance ran suggestively over her again. If he had met her under other circumstances he would have asked her out to dinner. And more.

May had no trouble reading his look. “*Forget it.* Men in moldy, baggy red velvet are not a major turn-on for me.”

She wondering if her nose was growing. Hunter was an extremely attractive man. Even in the Santa suit.

“If it'll make you feel better, I'd be happy to remove it.” He grinned wickedly at her.

She exhaled. “You're just trying to annoy me because you're bored. Why don't you read?”

“*Read?* You've got books here? Why didn't you say so hours ago?”

She gave him an exasperated look. “What do you think has been staring at you in that open carton over there by the fireplace?”

He shrugged. “Oh, well, those are *romance* books. I thought you meant you had—”

That deserved a glare. “Don't say it if you value your red velvet hide.”

“I didn't mean it like that. It's just that I've never—I mean they are women's books—”

“It's not like you have anything else to do— why don't you pick up one, you might be surprised.”

He speculated on that, then walked over to the box of books. He knelt down, shuffling through the titles. “Is your book in here?”

“Why would I bring my own book?”

Hunter shrugged. “Why not? Is May Forrester your real name?”

“May is; Forrester is a nom de plume.”

Hunter picked up one of her favorite

books, opening the step-back cover. His eyes widened. “This guy doesn't have anything on but a towel!”

“Best towel I've ever seen,” she agreed with a smile.

He threw her a look. “So what is your real last name?” He sat down on the floor near the fireplace, opening the book.

“Bea.”

He read a few paragraphs, then stopped, capturing her in his gaze. “Your real name is May Bea?” Rich laughter filled the room.

“Stop that!”

“That must have been real interesting in high school— ‘May Bea she will and May Bea she won't.’” He chuckled,

shaking his head. “No wonder you took a pen name.”

May snapped the lid of her laptop shut. The man was not going to let her work! And he was too close to the mark; the kids had teased her mercilessly when she was young. Which was probably why she had become a writer; she had often run off by herself and daydreams had been her constant companions.

She placed her hands on her hips. “And who are you to talk? I can just guess what hideous first name is hidden by the initial C, Mr. C. Hunter Douglas!”

A dimple showed in his cheek. “Go ahead.” His silver eyes flashed challengingly at her.

She hesitated, leery of the look on his

provocative face. "Go ahead what?"

"Try and guess."

She narrowed a distrustful look at him. "You'll tell me if I guess correctly?"

"Sure."

"All right." She tapped her foot against the wooden floor. "Cecil."

"Nope."

"Clem."

He grinned. "Uh-uh." He went back to reading his book.

"Don't you worry, I have a whole week to come up with it."

"It's enough to give one pause," he said without looking up. Which was a good thing, because his eyes were definitely twinkling with humor.

And something else.

Chapter Eleven

By the way, what *was* the name of your book?"

It was late evening. Hunter had moved up to the bed. The floor was drafty and, with the winds still howling from the unabated storm, May guessed, downright cold.

It was going to make sleeping difficult for him.

She had already decided to offer him the one and only quilt. She would have to try to keep herself warm with her

jacket.

“You know very well what the name of it is.”

He quirked his brow. “Let's pretend I don't.”

“Love's Loose Canon.”

He burst into laughter.

May was incensed. “It's a pirate story, so stop that right now! There were *lots* of people who loved it.”

He stopped laughing; that had gotten the publisher's attention. “By ‘lots’ what are we talking about?”

“Romance is *very* popular.”

Translated for him, it meant profitable.

He suddenly became serious. “I know; I've been looking into it, actually. My uncle has some old-fashioned notions

about what Fortuna should and should not publish.”

“Well, this could turn out to be a very good opportunity for you! You have the time, I've got the books, not to mention my knowledge of the genre, which I am willing to let you pick at— you could make good use of your time here.”

A tiny line formed across his brow as he considered it. “Mmm... that's not a bad idea.”

“Just remember, I'm off limits.”

He looked her questioningly.

“I— I mean as far as writing for your company,” she stammered.

He smiled rather sexily, enjoying her discomfort. “Does that mean you're ‘on limits’ for anything else?”

“Don't be cute.”

He batted his thick lashes at her. “I can't help it; I'm a publisher. We're naturally alluring to writers.”

“You have a warped mind.”

He winked at her. “I'm going to take a shower. Any chance of finding a razor?” He rubbed the dark shadow on his cheeks.

While May thought the shadowy beard very attractive, giving him a brooding, dangerous look, she also recognized the wisdom of removing it from her sight. Hunter was starting to look tempting.

“Check the medicine cabinet; I think Billy left some stuff in there.”

“Billy?”

“My neighbor— this is his place.”

Hunter nodded, whistling off to the bathroom.

Surely she had misread that brief flash of relief in his eyes?

Hunter lathered his thick hair with some shampoo he found. Along with razor, shaving cream, deodorant, and best of all, a new toothbrush, he didn't feel half bad. Good ole Billy. He'd have to thank the man personally for the supplies.

Earlier, Hunter had noticed a box of condoms on the top shelf behind a large bottle of mouthwash. It remained to be seen whether he would be thanking the man for those as well. Ms. May Bea was looking mighty tempting to him.

In fact, she had from the instant he had

first seen her.

Admittedly, he had been momentarily turned off when he discovered she had almost cracked his skull. But once he found out she was a writer, he realized he couldn't hold the outlandish behavior against her.

She couldn't help it. The poor kid.

The hot water sluiced over his head.

It felt great. The cabin was drafty as hell, and the heating system didn't keep up with the nightly drop in temperature.

When he came out of the shower, he eyed the red velvet outfit distastefully. He was going to have to see what he could rustle up in the way of clothes. And he wasn't going to put on that moldy red suit again until he washed it.

Donning his T-shirt and boxers, he padded out of the bathroom.

May was leaning over the bed, and he had a very good view of her backside. She had changed into a heavy flannel nightgown; inexplicably the old-fashioned garment looked sexier than a lacy negligee to him.

Her derriere wiggled under the loose flannel as she tried to pull the quilt free from the top mattress. Hunter crossed his arms over his chest and, leaning against the fireplace mantel, considered the scenery. It was... picturesque.

And it worked for him.

He felt himself begin to harden.

When she turned around and saw him standing there, she jumped a little.

Seemingly against her will, her sights drifted to his paisley boxers, hesitating slightly. He wasn't really erect but he was... bulging. A becoming blush stained her cheeks.

Which made him bulge more.

He stepped forward. "Ready to go to bed?" His voice held the slow drawl of suggestion.

May sucked in her breath. *He was gorgeous.* Even the wretched red suit had not been able to disguise that fact, but when he appeared fresh from his shower in a V-neck white T-shirt and silk boxers, May was nonplused. He had an exquisite physique. Perfectly toned.

Real contemporary hero material, she acknowledged to herself.

However, the heated look in his silver eyes said he had more on his mind than sleeping. Therefore, May did the only thing a romance writer could do in this situation: she stuffed the quilt into his arms and showed him the floor.

To say that C. Hunter Douglas was not a happy camper was an understatement.

He was even less happy when she allowed the wiener dog to get into bed with her.

The floor was hard, cold, and drafty. Hunter heard the dog rustling close to her under her jacket. He bit off an expletive.

For a dog, Benny was one lucky bastard.

Chapter Twelve

Sometime in the middle of the night, May felt the bed dip.

Sleepily, she opened her eyes to the sight of Hunter crawling into bed with her.

She was instantly wide awake. “What do you think—” He placed a finger against her mouth.

“It's freezing on that floor. I'm sleeping here and I don't want to hear one word.” That said, he covered them both with the quilt.

Then he turned his back to her.

May's lips curved in amusement. And didn't that sound just like a hero in a book? She'd have to remember that line.

The bed shook slightly and she realized he was shivering. So he really had been cold. Unaccountably, she felt bad for him. His T-shirt and boxers couldn't be providing him with much protection.

Turning her back to him, she scooted a little bit closer to give him some of her body heat. May heard a faint sigh of contentment coming from his side of the bed.

Benny wiggled under the quilt like a sand worm, heading to the foot of the bed. He covered Hunter's cold feet with

his long, puppy-warm body, giving his ankle a little lick before settling in to sleep.

Hunter got the strangest impression that he had just come home.

It didn't make sense, but he was too comfortable to care.

Chapter Thirteen

‘He threw back his head and roared with laughter...’

May looked at the sentence she had just typed on her screen. Something about it bothered her.

She paused, brow furrowed. “He threw back his head and roared with laughter”? She read it again, this time picturing the strange scene in her mind. May wondered if the gesture didn't indicate a silent plea from her hero for Prozac...

What's the matter with me? Everyone loves it when the hero does that! I love it when the hero does that...

May sneaked a peek at Hunter, who was sitting on the floor by the fire, engrossed in one of her books.

Well, if Hunter started throwing back his head to roar with laughter she was going to radio that sheriff to have them parachute down some medication for him!

She shut off her laptop.

When this kind of stuff happened, May knew it was useless even to attempt to write. Yawning, she stretched her hands over her head to loosen stiff muscles, her mind going to that morning and how she had awakened in Hunter's arms.

He had been wrapped all over her, and to make matters worse, Benny was tangled up in there with them, too. The three of them lay there like a multi-tentacled lump of snoozing flesh.

The man might suffer insomnia on occasion, but when he did fall asleep, he slept like the dead.

“Hunter!” She jabbed an elbow in his side.

“Nnnn,” he mumbled into the curve of her neck. The man was too comfortable.

“Claude?”

She felt him smile against the skin of her throat. “No.” He snuggled in and went back to sleep. After a few minutes, May gave up on the idea of untangling herself and fell asleep again as well.

The next time she woke, Hunter was up and making coffee in the kitchenette.

That's when she discovered him draped over the refrigerator drinking the Half-and-Half. *From the carton.*

She let out an ear-piercing shriek.

Stupefied, Hunter stared at her, a mustache of white coating his upper lip.

May made a dive for the carton, rescuing what was left of her cream.

“You fiend!” She clutched the carton to her bosom.

“What in the world is wrong with you?”

“I'm a writer; I have to have coffee! It's our lifeblood; our adrenaline!”

Having had a great deal of experience with the breed, Hunter calmly inquired,

“Can't you drink it black?”

“No!” She clutched the carton tighter.

“It's my one weakness. My God, you drank almost half the container!”

He gave her a patient look. “Your *one* weakness,” he said dryly.

“And you were drinking right from the carton!” She screwed up her face. “Eew! I hate it when men do that! What is it—something genetic with you guys?”

She ranted on until he poured her a cup of coffee, pried the cream lose from her, plopped some into her cup, and brought it to her lips, forcing her to drink.

Those silver eyes flashing all the while in amusement.

She was fine after the first cup.

May glanced to where he was sitting by the fire. What was he reading that had him so engrossed? He hadn't lifted his nicely shaped nose from that book in hours.

She squinted her eyes to read the title. No wonder. It was one of her favorite authors and the woman wrote steam heat. Her love scenes could blister paint from a wall. Smiling, she went back to her own story.

Hunter closed the book and leaned his back against the wall of the cabin.

He had just had an incredible revelation.

He had just realized that all these years he had known next to nothing about women. Not according to these books,

anyway.

Like most men, he had always assumed that women wanted the same things men did. Now, he realized, they wanted something *else*. Something completely different. Something more.

Did they really go for the swaggering, drag-them-by-the-hair, boy-next-door type? And what did that mean? How could one man be all those things?

Did a man with a heavy-lidded expression— whatever the hell *that* was — turn them into... He tried to recall how the last author had phrased it. “A bowl of mush.”

And those love scenes.

Mama mia.

They were beyond even his

imagination. Since Hunter had always prided himself as a man with an excellent imagination, especially in bed, he was impressed. *I've discovered something here.*

It was a blueprint! A set of directions. Waiting in every bookstore, supermarket, and airport for any man smart enough to find it.

His sights rested on May. Luscious, soft, sweet-smelling May. Totally-oblivious-to-her-own-appeal May. Who had made him stone hard with one sweep of those sexy green eyes.

Hunter smiled wickedly. The theory was at least worth a test run.

Chapter Fourteen

That night Hunter came out of his shower wrapped in the quilt.

He sat by the fireplace and pretended to read. Making doubly sure the quilt slipped over his shoulder and down one side of his chest.

May finished the last sentence in her chapter and gratefully closed down her computer. “Well, that does it for toni—”

Hunter was sitting by the fire dressed in nothing but that fluffy comforter. May swallowed. *Is he naked under there?*

Firelight bounced off the highlights in his rich brown hair, gilding his shoulder and chest. May noted that said shoulder was plenty muscular and said chest was nicely delineated.

Hunter shifted his attention from his book to her, gazing at her with a carefully constructed, boyishly sweet, totally innocent expression. Like the book said. “Were you saying something?”

She quaked a bit under that intense regard. “N-no, just that I'm finished working for the night.”

“Oh. Were you going to take a shower? I washed all my clothes and hung them up over the tub, but I'll take them down if you need to use it.”

“Thanks.” Her voice cracked a bit. She was right; he was naked under there.

It was sweet of him to offer to clear the shower for her... although, she didn't want him to move just yet. He looked awfully cute sitting there quietly reading a book.

Naked.

But for the quilt.

“It'll just take me a minute.” He stood up, clumsily gathering the quilt about him. A section accidentally parted, revealing a tantalizing glimpse of tanned, muscled thigh before his fist clenched the material closed.

May forced herself to look away. Unfortunately, the picture must have seared in her brain, for she could not

seem to shake it.

Hunter exited the bathroom, his damp clothes draped over his arm.

“You *washed* the velvet suit?” she asked incredulously.

“Uh-huh. Why? Is something wrong?” He looked at her earnestly.

She didn't have the heart to tell him. He'd find out soon enough when it dried. And could stand on its own.

She straightened the stack of papers she had printed out, scanning them for typos. A voice came from right behind her chair and it sounded like a croaking bullfrog.

“You must be stiff from sitting here all day; would you like me to massage—”

She gaped at him over her shoulder.

“What happened to your voice?”

He seemed surprised at her reaction. He frowned. “I’m speaking to you in a husky murmur.”

“Well, don’t. You sound like a foghorn at low tide.”

Hunter stroked his freshly shaved jaw. “I must be doing it wrong. Can you demonstrate it for me?”

She put her hands on her hips. “Where did you ever get such a crazy idea? And why do you want to talk in a husky murmur?”

“I’m... testing out something. Go with me on this, okay?”

She expelled a gust of breath. The man was strange. “All right. Try this.” She lowered her voice to a throaty,

intimate drawl. “*The shower's ready and waiting...*”

Hunter's eyes glazed over. His heart kick-started. He leaned toward her...

“Your turn,” she said in her normal voice.

Hunter pulled up short. Well, it sure worked on him! Positive that he could give as good as he got, he cleared his throat to try again.

Resting his forearm on the back of her chair, he bent close to her, whispering softly, “Your... shower is *ready* and I'm waiting...”

May's eyes widened. “Th-that's good.” More than just good. Drooling good.

The corners of Hunter's mouth curved.

He decided to move in a little closer to her. He wanted to kiss that little curve on the corner of her mouth that had been fascinating him since he met her.

May bounced out of her chair. “Guess I better take advantage of it then, huh?” She dashed to the bathroom.

Just before she closed the door, she called out, “Cedric?”

“No,” he yelled back, smiling. *It was working.* He could feel it in his... bones. The thought made him laugh. Huskily.

Chapter Fifteen

“My underwear is still damp. I guess I'll have to sleep like this.”

Hunter gestured to the quilt covering his bronzed skin and gave her an apologetic “it's beyond my control—what can I do?” look which didn't quite pass muster.

May's black brow notched. The man was getting decidedly frisky. And if he thought he was crawling into bed with her buck naked, he had another think coming. There was no chance she was

going to wake up in the morning wrapped up with an *in-the-raw* Hunter.

She marched to the bathroom, where he had slung the clothes he'd washed over the shower rod. Hunter followed behind warily. May looked like she meant business.

Spotting the paisley silk, she whipped the shorts off the rack and grabbed her blow dryer. Adjusting the heat setting to low, she held the very edge of the garment up between two fingers as if it might bite her at any moment and blasted the dampness right out of it.

Hunter's lips parted slightly. Now, why hadn't he ever thought of that? His second thought was: foiled.

May turned to him with his boxers

dangling from her index finger. The arrangement of her features was definitely smug. “There you go— nice and dry.”

Sheepishly, Hunter reached for them. “Ah, yeah. Thanks.”

Once again, when they got into bed they turned their backs to each other.

Just before May drifted off, she asked him in the darkness, “Chester?”

Hunter smiled, drowsy. “Nope.” He rubbed his silk-covered backside against her flannel-covered one before falling into a restful sleep.

Chapter Sixteen

Hunter tossed a piece of apple to Benny, then crunched into his fourth apple of the day. And it was only late afternoon. He was getting mighty sick of apples.

Well, beggars couldn't be choosers. Desultorily he wolfed down the fruit. He was starving.

Those frozen meals were not enough for him, even though May had been giving him two of the tiny cuisine meals every night.

His silver gaze wandered to the windows. It had stopped snowing this morning but it was a real mess out there. There was no chance of getting to his car. Not without boots and a plow.

He looked down at his wardrobe. May had dug out a pair of her black sweat pants this morning after he discovered that the red velvet suit was now a free-standing sculpture. They fit him like a second skin and only came to mid-calf on him, but he had been determined to ram down into them.

There was a faint floral perfume to the pants which evoked May. The fact that he was *inside* them, surrounded by the scent, made him... bulge. A situation made more blatant by the stretchy

material.

He rubbed the bridge of his nose, wishing it were something else. Something May.

This morning she had been draped over his back, her cheek using his shoulder as a pillow. One of her small hands had found its way around his waist to rest flat against his lower stomach, just above the band of his shorts.

In his sleep his hand had come over hers, making sure she didn't leave the needy spot. He was uncomfortably aroused and had a hell of a time disengaging himself from her without waking her up.

The memory of it alone was enough to

get him going again.

Frustrated, he grabbed up another book. *Rough Possession* was the title. Hunter quickly threw it down and picked up another. *Day for Knight*. That sounded innocuous enough.

He began to read.

Across the room, May furtively eyed Hunter.

He was engrossed in his book and he didn't seem to be paying any attention to her.

Good.

Her hand inched slowly to the stack of papers on her lap. The stack that was hiding the half-eaten package of M&M's she had found in the bottom of her purse this morning.

She was starving.

In desperation she had tackled her pocketbook for booty and had come up with a small treasure trove.

Covertly she rooted around in the little bag, her finger snagging the small candy-coated jewel. Glancing his way one more time to be certain the coast was clear, she secretively brought the nugget of heaven to her mouth where she sucked on it for five minutes, savoring every molecule.

When it was over, her eyes were dilated with chocolate satisfaction.

Hunter was still engaged in the book. And looking damn fine, she thought resentfully. Those black sweat pants had been a mistake. Instead of covering him

up and removing temptation from her sight, they seemed to be doing the opposite. The clingy material delineated every muscle in his strong thighs.

Every muscle.

May fanned herself with a sheet of paper. Hunter was packing.

She rummaged around for another M&M.

“What are you eating?”

May's head snapped up, her face flaming guiltily. “What?”

Hunter's silver eyes narrowed. “Don't what me— you've got something stashed away under those papers. What is it?” He tossed his book down. Rising to his feet, he began stalking her.

She didn't know why she did what she

did.

There must have been a little devil on her shoulder.

She looked the publisher square in the eye and, parting her lips, she stuck out her tongue and flaunted the yellow M&M at him.

It was like waving a red flag at a bull. Hunter charged her.

Squealing, May bolted out of her chair and took off. The papers and the candy package which had been on her lap toppled to the floor.

Hunter stopped briefly to grab the empty M&M wrapper. Then he turned and sets his sights on her.

“Last one,” May taunted around the candy in her mouth.

Hunter lunged for her.

If she hadn't backed herself against a wall she might have escaped.

His palms came down on either side. He pinned her in place with the lower half of his body. Even through her jeans, May had no trouble feeling the hardness that pressed against her. Her breath caught in her throat.

She looked up into his face. A lock of mahogany hair had fallen over his forehead, giving his face a definite rakish cast.

As he bent his head, May noted that he didn't seem to be thinking about candy anymore. By the glint in those silvery eyes, it appeared that Hunter had decided to substitute one gratification

for another.

May squeaked, the sound distorted by the candy in her mouth. “Hunter, you shouldn't—”

His mouth sizzled over hers.

There really was no other way to describe it.

A hot flame shot down the center of her body to her toes. Which began to wiggle.

May moaned into his mouth. There was only one other man who had ever made her toes wiggle... and not nearly this much.

Hunter removed one of his hands from the wall and cupped the back of her head, holding her to him. He strengthened the kiss, probing between

her slightly parted lips with his tongue. Sinking deeper and deeper with every delving thrust, he forced her to open her mouth wider, to accept him...

He plunged into her with rough expertise, neither too naive nor too practiced. His movements were honest and raw. He explored her thoroughly, leaving her totally breathless and wanting more Hunter.

May thought he tasted sweeter than any candy, and she clutched at his shoulders to bring him closer.

This time it was Hunter who groaned. His other hand left the wall to capture her waist, clasping her tight against him.

She didn't know how long the kiss went on but when they came up for air,

May was feeling somewhat disoriented. She placed her palm against his chest to steady herself.

He was breathing heavily, but was curiously silent. Warily she glanced up at him.

His eyes glimmered with heat and... something akin to mischief. He quirked his brow in a cocky way, then slowly opened his mouth.

The yellow M&M dangled impudently from his tongue.

“Hunter!”

He grinned roguishly at her.

“That was a dirty trick!”

“Mmm... best M&M I ever had,” he drawled. He made a great show of savoring the candy, even to the point of

licking his lips when he was done.

May's face flamed.

He chuckled, leaning back into her.

“Seconds?” he asked innocently.

“No!” She shoved his chest, pushing him away.

“You mean you don't like the heated press of my masculine lips against the soft fullness of your ripened mouth?” He spoke from behind her.

“Don't you dare!” she gritted out, refusing to look at him.

“Surely you felt the savage intensity of my raging hunger as I claimed you with the brand of my desire?”

“You are horrible!” She walked to the bathroom and slammed the door behind her.

His low laughter followed her.

May winced. The truth was she had felt all those things.

She splashed cold water on her face.

Chapter Seventeen

“What's wrong with Benny?”

Hunter had just come out of his nightly shower and when he bent down next to her, May caught a whiff of soap and after-shave. Old Spice. Billy's choice, she knew; Hunter was definitely not the type to buy Old Spice.

For some reason, the spicy scent reminded her that it was Christmas Eve.

She delicately inhaled more of the scent. It brought her back to her childhood when she had lived by the

coast in a small New England fishing village. A lot of the men had worn Old Spice back then, and she rather liked the old-fashioned scent.

The word old-fashioned brought to mind how gentlemanly Hunter had been these last few nights, letting her shower first, giving her best crack at the hot water, which had a tendency to suddenly give out.

She adjusted her nightgown as she sat cross-legged on the floor.

“He has a tummy ache.” She continued to rub the dachshund's belly.

Benny lay on his back, short feet up in the air, in what May was beginning to think of as his dead cockroach position. The wiener dog's expression was a

carefully balanced blend of ecstasy at what she was doing— combined with the sad “I’m a poor puppy” face which instantly produced a feeling of guilt in humans.

“How did he get an upset stomach?” Hunter had the nerve to ask that seriously.

May threw him a look. “How many pieces of apple did you give him today?”

A dull bronze colored his cheekbones. “I... ah... don't remember.”

Benny gave a little whimper right on cue.

Hunter was consumed with remorse. “Hey, there, fellah.” His hand joined hers on the dog's belly, rubbing. “Will

he be all right?"

With all the attention, Benny was in puppy heaven and trying hard not to show it, while the man leaning over him had an expression of concern which only comes from an owner of a beloved pet. May smiled inwardly. Hunter was as good as gotten.

"Yes, but you shouldn't keep tossing him food; he probably can't eat so many strange combinations."

Hunter nodded, continuing to rub the dog's stomach with her. Every now and then their hands brushed against each other.

"How come you didn't do this for me when I had a tummy ache?" Hunter murmured next to her ear.

“Because you don't keep my feet warm at night,” she replied without thinking.

May realized her mistake as soon as she saw those dark lashes lift languorously and those silvery eyes met her own.

There was such a frankly sexual look in them that her breath stopped in her throat.

“I'd be happy to keep you warm at night.”

He did it. He spoke in a husky murmur.

And it sounded exactly the way she had imagined a perfectly executed husky murmur would sound. It even sent shivers down her spine.

He leaned toward her just a bit, and May knew he was going to kiss her. Instinctively she moved her head back a few inches.

His hand came over hers on top of Benny.

His other hand cupped the back of her neck, bringing her up against his descending mouth in a seamless move. She opened her mouth to attempt to object, but Hunter was already there.

His lips covered hers in a gentle press that was somehow persuasive at the same time. The tender act turned May into.... a bowl of mush.

Her mouth softened beneath his, returning his kiss.

Like any red-blooded man, Hunter

took this as encouragement. He went from softly coaxing to “seize-the-moment fire” in the blink of an eye.

May gasped. What were they doing? She began to pull back.

“Hunter, stop!” She tried to speak between the molten imprint of his ongoing kisses. It was almost impossible; the man was definitely charged up.

“We shouldn't be doing this,” she managed to croak just before he swept inside her mouth, staking a devastating claim. She moaned in response.

“Why not?” he whispered a few seconds later, not stopping in the least.

The question had been rhetorical, but May attempted to respond any way. “Be-

because... you're only doing this because you're hungry! You're substituting—”

He chuckled, a low rumble against her lips. “I'm *hungry* all right.” His mouth moved along her jawline to her throat.

May sucked in her breath. That was a very sensitive area. She closed her eyes, desperately trying again. “You see? You admitted it. You've been complaining how starving—”

He stopped. Raising his head, he looked at her, desire and something akin to amusement lighting his features.

With his lips a mere heartbeat away from hers, he purred, “I'm hungry for May.”

Then his mouth seized hers and that

was the end of that objection.

How did the man kiss like that? May was devastated and knew it. Especially since her toes were wiggling like mad under the hem of her nightgown.

His lips moved back to her throat, and May actually arched her throat to give him better access.

Hunter breathed in her flowery scent and went as hard as a brick.

Earlier, in the bathroom, he had opened her jar of floral scented cream and had inhaled deeply. It had not had the same effect on him and he realized that it needed the added factor of May. Her personal, sexy scent which had been driving him crazy since that first night.

His mouth closed over the spot of

tender skin under her ear and he felt her tremble. She was responding to him.

“*Hunter...*” It was the sound of a woman in the throes of desire; however, there was the faintest hint of underlying protest.

He did not want her to stop him. Not now. Not ever. C. Hunter Douglas wanted May “Forrester” Bea.

So, clever strategist that he was, he decided to make absolutely sure of her compliance.

He was going to pull all the stops out and completely test his new theory. He was going to follow the directions that had been handed to him in the books he'd read. He was going to make love to her with *romance*.

He leaned over and, gathering her in his arms, he stood, without breaking the kiss. It was not an easy thing to do from a sitting position, but Hunter was a strong, large man. He hoped the small pop he heard in his back had been the settling of his joints and not a disc compressing.

Benny gave one bark of protest at the loss of his belly rub, then gave up, apparently recognizing when it was pointless for a dog to bid for attention.

Hunter carried her to the bed, gently depositing her in its center. He immediately came over her, his silk boxers sliding against the flannel of her gown.

His mouth fused with hers as he laced

his fingers through her hair and kissed her senseless.

May's hands reached for his bare shoulders. They were muscular and hard, yet so very warm... And the way the man kissed should be illegal!

He had carried her to the bed, actually carried her to the bed!

Her toes wiggled.

Hunter's knee wedged between her flannel-clad legs. He rubbed his thigh back and forth in a suggestive slide, inching higher and higher. The flannel of her gown pulled taut with his erotic motions and she gasped into his mouth.

How could she come to her senses when he wasn't giving her time to think?

One of his hands moved to the front of

her gown and he cupped her breast, flicking his thumb slowly back and forth across the flannel-covered nipple. It hardened instantly.

He covered the jutting peak with his mouth, capturing it with his teeth.

When May felt the damp heat of his mouth through the material, a strangled sob seem to escape from her throat. Without thinking, she sank her fingers in the rich thickness of his mahogany hair. Drawing him closer.

He began to unbutton the front placket of her gown.

The feel of the tips of his fingers against the soft skin of her breast suddenly made May realize what she was doing. “Hunter,” she choked, “what

— what are we doing?”

Hunter paused. She was starting to balk. Now what? Time out for following the directions, he realized.

“You feel this, sweetheart?” He spoke against her lips as he stroked his fingers around her breast.

May closed her eyes and nodded.

“I'm stroking my hand against your velvet skin— here. And here.” He brushed her lips with his mouth. “Does it feel good?” he whispered.

“Yes... oh, yes, Hunter, it does,” she whispered back breathlessly.

Hmmm... it seemed to be working. “Do you know what I'm going to do next?”

She watched him, eyes open wide.

Slowly she shook her head, indicating she had no idea.

“I'm going to dip my hot tongue into your luscious mouth and then...” He paused purposely.

May swallowed. My god, the man was dangerous. And he was very good with dialogue. “And then?” she asked faintly.

The corner of his mouth lifted in a roguish grin. “And then, lovely May, I'm going to *drink*.”

She gasped, lips parting, and Hunter did exactly as he said he would. He delved into her. And drank. May writhed beneath him, caught up in the sensual storm he was creating.

He reached down and methodically

lifted her nightgown inch by inch up and over her head. She wore nothing underneath. When the entire six-foot length of his flesh pressed against her, heavy and hot, she sighed into his mouth.

Hunter ran the palms of his hands over the curves of her body, marveling at how exquisite the touch of her skin was. He hadn't stopped to get a thorough look, but he had seen enough.

May was beautiful.

He expected she would be because... well, she had had that effect on him right from the beginning. In his eyes, she would always be beautiful.

He took her breast into his mouth and she arched up against him, a small, sexy moan of pleasure escaping her lips. The

feminine sound shook him to his core.

“Hunter!”

“Easy, May... I'm just tasting you.”

He rolled his tongue around the jutting peak. “And teasing you.” He flicked the nubbin several times, causing her to clutch at his shoulders.

“And taking you inside the burning dampness of my fiery mouth so I can draw on you with an untold hunger,” he improvised.

May blinked. An untold hunger? That line needed a good editor. But then he drew on her voraciously, and in the next instant she didn't care what he was saying.

It was what he was *doing* that held her interest. And what he was doing was

sending her over the roof. His hands were caressing her and molding her. Stroking and rubbing and stirring her up with each delicious sweep of his fingers.

Her palms found their way down his contoured back and of their own accord slipped under the elastic band of his shorts.

But no further.

May suddenly comprehended that there was only the thin silk of his boxers between the two of them.

And that item of clothing had a convenient slit in it.

May swallowed nervously. She couldn't do this! There was a very good reason why she couldn't do this. Suddenly scared, she desperately

searched her brain for an excuse, *any* excuse that would...

She had it.

Grabbing a hank of his thick hair, she pulled his head up. Glazed silvery eyes tried to focus on her. “We can't do this, Hunter.”

He stared at her, frozen to the spot. Then he nodded, as if he understood what she was saying. “It's okay—I'll deal with the fact that you're a writer.”

May's eyes darkened. “No, you numbskull! I'm not talking about that. I mean we can't do this because we don't have... protection.” There. That seemed an excellent reason. The best reason. She was very proud of herself.

Dazed, Hunter paused, his kiss-

swollen lips parting a little.

The poor thing.

Then a slow, calculating smile creased his passion-etched face. She did not like that look. “What are you smiling for? Didn't you hear me? We have to stop and I—”

“May.”

She stopped speaking to stare up at him.

“Don't you want to feel the driving thrust of my steely manhood between the petals of your tender femininity as I masterfully take you to a place where only the angels dwell?”

This he rasped in that perfected husky murmur of his.

“That is, until we float back down

from the stars to the safe cushion of our entwined bodies.”

Her face flamed. In some strange way she couldn't define, his words were having the oddest effect on her. It was as if... No.

In any case— despite the rather enticing image his words provoked—they could not go on.

Hunter didn't seem to share her opinion. Taking her silence (and flushed face) as interest, he winked rakishly at her.

Furthermore, the silk shorts were quickly dispensed with.

“Hunter!”

A whoosh of cold air crossed her body as he jumped off the bed. May got

a brief flash of something rather...
robust, before she was presented with
his backside as he headed toward the
bathroom.

Her sweat pants hadn't lied—
Hunter's bulge was nothing less than
impressive. His buns weren't bad, either,
she clinically noted as he strutted
through the door. Not bad at-all...

Realizing she was lying on the bed
buck naked, she dived under the covers.
Then began to wring her hands. Was that
it? Was he just... leaving?

Or was he coming back?

May didn't know whether to exhale or
take a deep breath.

She soon found that Hunter was
coming back.

And in his hands were *dozens* of foil packages. She decided to take a deep breath. Her brilliant excuse had just gone out the window. “Where did you get those?” she gasped.

He grinned at her. “Good ole Billy—your neighbor.”

“Billy?” This was more bizarre than she thought. She cocked her head sideways, trying to come to terms with the idea. “He's in his sixties! *At least.*”

Hunter snorted. “So what?”

May plucked at the quilt. “Well, I just thought... men that old didn't... I mean.

”

...

“You thought wrong. My uncle is seventy-three and he's still pounding his —” He stopped, realizing what he was

saying. C. Hunter Douglas turned bright red. “Ah.... sorry.”

Her lips twitched. He really was adorable. The perfect combination of boyish charm and predatory “hunkiness.” She sighed demurely.

Unfortunately, her *nice* thoughts of him shifted to apprehension when he tossed the mound of packets onto the bedside table.

She swallowed. There were hundreds of the little buggers. “You— you're being overly optimistic, don't you think?”

“Nope.” He lifted the quilt and climbed into bed.

Before she had time to think of something to say, he scooped her in his

arms and rolled on top of her, his lips taking hers in swift possession.

Caught in her own sensuality, May succumbed to his passion— until he began gently to probe between her thighs with his erection, trying to get her to unlock her legs.

“Open for me, honey,” He whispered the sweet words against her mouth, and if anything was ever more perfectly done in her life, she hadn't known about it. Still...

The wispy words rushed out. “Oh, Hunter, it's been... such a long time and —”

“Don't worry, sweetheart, I'll be careful.”

May unlocked her legs— a little—

and squeezed her eyes shut.

What was this all about? Hunter wondered. Since she had only spread her legs the smallest space, he had to wedge himself in there bit by bit until she finally opened her thighs all the way for him.

Hunter pressed forward slightly.

She was very tight. A little bit more...

He felt the barrier.

Astonished, he looked down at the woman beneath him. Her face was drawn up anxiously and she was biting her bottom lip.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, his lips twitched. *Does she think I can't tell?* "May." His voice held a hint of laughter and a hint of

reproach.

She did not change her expression or open her eyes. “Yes, Hunter?” she whispered haltingly.

He decided that what he was going to say could wait until later.

“Aren't you going to kiss me?” His mouth brushed her closed lids in a loving caress.

Her green eyes fluttered open. “Oh, yes, of course, I was just—”

His mouth covered hers and he sunk into her, rapidly piercing the thin membrane.

She flinched, then lay perfectly still.

“I'm sorry,” he spoke quietly in her ear but May didn't even hear him. She was too wrapped up in the feel of

Hunter. He was inside her and it was... it was... precisely as she had imagined.

Giving her time to adjust to him, he brushed his lips across her slightly parted mouth, back and forth, laving the seam with his tongue, gently suckling on her lower lip.

“*Hunter*,” she uttered tremulously.

“I know, honey. I know.” He kissed her deeply.

When he began to gently move in her, May cried into his mouth, small sounds of feminine pleasure that made it very difficult for him to maintain his control. She was driving him crazy. His body was telling him hard and fast, but his mind was cautioning him: slow and easy.

A sweat broke out across his brow but he held to his guarded tempo.

It was May who finally changed the pace.

Wrapping her arms tightly around his neck and her legs securely around his waist, she hugged him to her, her uneven voice shyly beseeching him, “More?”

It was the sexiest thing he had ever heard in his life. Hunter groaned out loud. And gave her more. Much more.

He drove into her with strength and power, releasing the passion he previously held in check for her sake. May went right along with him, encouraging him, begging him, commending him, in the unintelligible words of lovers which always spoke

volumes.

A pounding, building tempest overtook her, lifting her higher and higher. It was extraordinary... she was pulsing everywhere and she wanted to—had to

“Let go, sweetheart, let it go,” Hunter rasped, guiding her even as he took her.

May cried out and let go and everything simply exploded around her. He thrust into her *deep* and clutching her to him, he covered her mouth with his own, joining her in a powerful release. May was intensely aware of the moment, of Hunter, of their joining.

It was a special gift that she would treasure forever; he had given her what every woman dreams of, hopes for. He

had made the reality of her first time a true fantasy. And she would love him forever for it.

Hunter smiled tenderly down at her. He kissed the edge of her temple, feathering her jawline with tiny nibbles. “It looks like my May Bea didn't.” He teased her softly. “How did you write all those love scenes?”

May kissed his chin. “Writers don't do *everything* they write about, Hunter.”

He thought about that. “True. If Rex Stevens did half the stuff he wrote about, he'd have gotten the electric chair twenty times over.”

She nodded. “We only wish we could.”

He laughed against her throat. Then

nuzzled her collarbone.

May sighed contentedly. Lovemaking *was* all that it was cracked up to be. And it was exactly the way she had written it countless times.

Incongruously, a large grin broke across her face. “Mmm, Hunter?”

Expecting to see a sexy, satisfied look on her face, Hunter was amazed to see a ridiculously huge smile. Confounded, he gave her a questioning look.

“*I am* a terrific writer!” She beamed up at him.

Oh-oh. It was another of those “writer” references that had a tendency to be non sequiturs. He had always marveled when he had seen two writers talking together; they always

seemed to understand each other. It was the damndest thing.

Well, Hunter had no idea what her being a good writer had to do with *this*, but he nodded as if he understood just the same.

He snuggled back into her neck.

And reached for another foil packet.

“Champ?” she whispered teasingly a few minutes later.

“Uh-uh.” Smiling, he nipped the curve of her neck.

Chapter Eighteen

Benny woke them up Christmas morning.

The little dog was barking and dancing around the bed, trying desperately to get Hunter to pay attention to him.

They both groaned.

Hunter had made love to May the entire night and they were both exhausted.

“What's the matter with him?” May mumbled sleepily. “Does he have to go

out?”

“I don't think so— I just let him out a few hours ago.” Hunter yawned, then leaned over May so he could see Benny over the edge of the bed. “Wuzza matter, fellah?”

Benny wagged his tail and barked twice. Then he trotted to the front door, looking over his shoulder to see if Hunter was following him.

“I guess he does have to go out.” Hunter rolled over May to get out of bed.

“Hunter!” she complained.

The corner of his mouth lifted crookedly in a smile and he bent over to kiss her nose. “Sorry.” Naked, he padded after Benny.

May got a very nice view. She crossed her arms over her chest to watch the show. “Anytime,” she murmured to herself.

“C'mon, Benny, we gotta go out the back door— too much snow out there.” Hunter started for the door off the kitchen but the wiener dog wouldn't budge from the front door. He stuck his long nose near the bottom crack and sniffed all along the edge, his tail wagging excitedly.

“What is it do you suppose?” May asked.

Hunter scratched his chin. “I don't know. But he thinks there's something out there.” Hunter walked over to where the dachshund was standing and carefully

opened the front door.

As he suspected, snow was piled three feet deep on the porch and there was no place to go.

“See, boy? Nothing there—”

Benny dived head first into the snowbank.

“Hey!” Hunter lunged after him, trying to retrieve him before he lost sight of the thumping tail.

He pulled Benny back out; the dog had a piece of cloth clamped in his jaws and was tugging furiously.

Curious, May squinted to get a better look. “What does he have in his mouth?”

“It's the sack!”

“What sack?”

“The sack of gifts I was carrying

when I came up here. I forgot all about it. I must have dropped it on the porch.” Hunter released Benny, putting him behind him; then he yanked the material, trying to loosen the large bag from under the snowdrift.

It came free suddenly, and both Hunter and the sack came hurtling into the room. May giggled.

Hunter regained his balance and gave her a look.

“Well, it is funny, Hunter; I mean, you are naked.”

Shivering, he closed the door. “Not for long— it's c-o-o-l-d.” He snatched up his shorts and T-shirt, putting them on.

Benny started circling the bag

excitedly, yapping his head off.

“Now what?”

May found her nightgown scrunched down at the foot of the bed. She was still buttoning it when she came beside him.

“What's in there?”

“Just gifts I was supposed to deliver.” He reached into the bag and pulled out a red package with a big white bow. A small tag dangled from the top.

Benny barked louder.

“To Joanna,” Hunter read the tag, “Merry Christmas from Santa Claus.”

Benny sat up, waving his front paws madly.

“I think he wants you to open it.”

Hunter shrugged. “Why not?” He unwrapped the gift. A huge grin filled

his face.

“What is it?” May looked at him inquiringly.

Hunter reached in the box and held up a plate of candied sweet potatoes.

May's eyes glazed over. “*Hunter.*”

“*Woof!*” Benny concurred.

“That's why he was barking, he could smell the food.”

“Do you think it's still okay?”

Hunter dipped his finger in the sauce and licked it off. “Mmmm-hmmm. Natural Maine refrigeration. It's perfect.”

May rushed over. “Open up the others, quick!”

Hunter grabbed the next package. “To Alicia, Happy Holidays courtesy of

Ingles Delicatessen, where Katya and Rolph say every bite of our food tastes like a little bit of magic.” This one held a scrumptious-looking pecan pie.

May and Hunter's eyes met above the plate.

In the next instant they were both diving for the boxes, tearing the wrappings open.

“To Jennifer... ” May opened a tray of assorted hors d'oeuvres.

“To Chris... ” Hunter held up a tureen of creamed pearl onions.

“This one is to Ted... ” May pulled out a pair of bay-berry candles and holders.

“For Richard, Happy Chanukah... ” A dish of giant potato pancakes. They both

licked their lips.

Next came a box of dog biscuits with “Benny's favorite” taped to the box. Hunter tossed him one, then reached in the bag to get the biggest gift out.

“To Johnny...” They both held their breath as he unwrapped it. It was a big Christmas ham.

May ran into the kitchen to get some plates and silverware. Hunter took the quilt off the bed and spread it before the fire. They were going to have Christmas dinner.

Soon they were seated before the fire feasting on the riches they had found.

May looked at the wonderful food before her, the sweet puppy lying contentedly by the fire, chewing on his

ham-bone, and the man next to her, who against all expectations had turned into a real-life hero.

Her eyes filled with moisture. “This is the best Christmas I’ve ever had, Hunter.”

He put his fork down to cover her hand with his. “Me, too, May.”

They came together to kiss.

“Casper?” She planted a soft kiss next to his dimple.

“No, honey.”

May sat back on her haunches. “Then what *is* it?”

Hunter grinned at her. “Christopher,” he said nonchalantly.

“*Christopher*? But that’s a nice name!” She was indignant.

He laughed. "I never said it wasn't, Ms. Bea. That was your idea."

"No wonder you had on a Santa suit," she grumbled. "With that name you were a shoo-in. How come you don't use it?"

"My grandfather's name is also Christopher. It got too confusing at family get-togethers."

As simple as that. No wonder he wasn't a writer. A writer would have a much better story than that.

However, flights of fancy notwithstanding, she was absolutely crazy about the publisher.

Hunter reached over, his hand clasping her about the neck. "You know what?" Their noses were almost touching.

“What?” she purred.

“I think I'm in love with you.”

May blinked, stunned.

“Know what else?” he went on unperturbed.

“N-no.”

“I think you love me, too.”

A writer and a publisher? How existential... May's thoughts were interrupted by his next question.

“Know what else?”

May shook her head.

“I predict that you and I will be here next Christmas and we'll be old married folks.” He stopped to stare at her poignantly. “What do you think of that, May?”

She did not have to think. “Mmmm, I

just love sequels... ” May closed the small distance between them.

After they ate, May went to store the leftovers in the refrigerator and Hunter was picking up in the room. He had already replaced the quilt on the bed and was in the process of folding the large cloth sack when a small card floated out of the bag to fall at his feet.

Thinking it was a tag that had fallen off a gift, he bent down to retrieve it and was about to throw it away when he spotted *his* name on the front of it. Gingerly he opened it and read:

To Hunter,

It seems Benny and you are

a perfect match. The other half of your gift is a lifelong one— something you've been needing for a long time. Remember, it only comes from following the “directions” exactly. Merry Christmas.

Your Friend, the Old Coot
P.S. It's a good thing I have an extra suit.

A cold sweat broke across Hunter's brow. He suddenly remembered the names of some of those nurses in the hospital. Nurse B. Litzen? Nurse Donner? And that little red-haired one...

Rudy.

No way.

What about that deli that supplied all those gifts for the children? Katya and Rolph Ingles... K. & R. Ingles... Kringles?

It couldn't be.

At that moment May came back to the room. Seeing his ashen expression, she asked, "Is something wrong, Hunter?"

He rubbed his hand across his face. Who would believe it? "No, everything is fine, sweetheart. C'mere, Benny." He patted his leg so the dog would come to him.

Benny obediently left his mangled hambone and trotted Hunter's way.

When the dog was sitting by his feet,

Hunter reached down and untied the blue ribbon around the dog's neck. "Welcome home, boy." He ruffled the fur on Benny's head.

Tongue hanging out, Benny gave his new master a look of pure adoration.

The burst of static from the radio surprised both of them. "Hey, Douglas, you there?" It was the sheriff's office.

Hunter went over to the radio, flicking the switch. "Yeah, go ahead."

"I have an urgent message from your editorial director."

Hunter took a deep breath. "Go ahead."

"She says, 'Rex's manuscript arrived last night from Sri Lanka. It's a knockout. Relax and enjoy the holiday.'"

Hunter was nonplused. Rex had come through. Big time. He actually felt his eyes get damp.

“We should be able to dig you out day after tomorrow,” the sheriff continued.

“That's okay, Sheriff.” He met May's eyes. “Take your time.” He switched the radio off.

May beamed at him. “You got your manuscript!”

Hunter hugged her to him. “That and a whole lot more.”

“*How romantic!*” May gazed up at him, love shining in her eyes. “Oh, Hunter, I absolutely adore you!”

He looked down at May and sighed. *Writers*. They were the best.

**Happy
Holidays!**

About the Author

Hailed as a break-out talent and publishing phenomenon by Publisher's Weekly, Dara Joy has written eight consecutive New York Times and USA Today bestselling novels. Over the span of her career, she has consistently been an Amazon bestselling author, hitting single digits on multiple Amazon best-seller lists, including Amazon's Top 100 and the Top Movers and Shakers list. Millions of Ms Joy's books have been sold worldwide and translated into numerous languages, including German,

Norwegian, Chinese, Korean, Russian, Spanish, Japanese, and Thai.

If you would like to find out about upcoming giveaways and other good stuff, I would love to have you join our mailing list! Just go to:

<http://officialdarajoy.com/MailingList.htm>

Simple as that.

Visit Dara on Facebook at:

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Dara-Joy/334247403836>

FROM THE AUTHOR:

Well, I hope I've given you some laughs and a bit o' love n' happiness for the holiday season.

To continue the good cheer, here's a nice, long excerpt for you from my novel, HIGH ENERGY. Trust me, Tyber Evans is perfect to curl up with next to a roaring fire... only it might be hard to tell the actual fire from, ah, him. (You have been warned, dear friend. Enjoy!)

Love, Dara

HIGH ENERGY

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Chapter One

“Men? Boil them in oil!”

“You don't mean that.”

“Cut off their—”

“Zanita!”

Zanita grinned at her friend Mills. “—*lying tongues.*”

“Uh-huh.”

“I was going to say lying tongues.”

“Sure.”

“Okay, so I wasn't. Anyhow, I am through, through, through!”

Mills sighed dramatically. “Haven't I heard this before?”

“I mean it this time, Mills.” Zanita slammed her palms down on the kitchen table for emphasis. “I have had it!”

“Really. Was it any good?” Mills tried to hide her smile in her coffee cup.

“Will you be serious? I'm trying to have a discussion here.”

Mills sat back in her chair. “Is that what this is? And here I thought you came all the way over here for a good old rant-and-rave session.”

Zanita threw up her hands in disgust. “That too!” She looked dismally down into her mug. “It certainly wasn't for your coffee.”

“Watch it. Everyone loves my coffee. Just because you happen to prefer brew a spoon can stand up in doesn't make you

a reliable critic. And we are getting off the subject— something you are remarkably good at, Zanita.”

“Well, what did you expect?”

Mills raised an eyebrow. “Lucidity? Rationality? Perhaps a modicum of believability?”

“All right.” Zanita looked her square in the eye. “It wasn't.”

“What wasn't?”

Zanita slumped in her chair. “It wasn't any good.”

Mills peered at her friend as if she had just come off Mars. Since people often wore that expression around her, Zanita chose to ignore it.

“You didn't!”

“I did.” She exhaled. “I don't want to

talk about it.”

“Then why did you bring it up?” Mills gave her a smug look.

“Okay, okay.” Her friend knew her too well. No big surprise. “It was just so ... *blah*.”

Mills blinked several times. “Blah?”

“You're looking at me like that again.”

“Like what?”

“Like I come from the mysterious face of Mars.”

“Sorry.” Mills leaned forward in her chair. “But we are talking about Rick, aren't we? Your current paramour?”

“My last, late paramour.” Zanita ran a hand distractedly through her short black curls. “And why are you so shocked?”

Mills leveled her a look. “I shall

count the reasons.” She ticked her fingers off one by one. “First, as I recall, wasn't it you who said you would never get involved with anyone again after Steve left you with nothing to remember him by except a mountain of debt?”

Zanita closely examined the flowers on the wallpaper to her left. “I guess that was me,” she mumbled.

“And wasn't it you who waited two years before going out again with anyone else?”

Zanita peered at the intricate pattern on the tile floor. “I guess that was me also.”

Mills nodded to emphasize Zanita's admission. “And wasn't it you who's been dating Rick for three months,

telling the poor guy, who happens to be crazy about you, that you want nothing more from him than a platonic friendship?”

Zanita drummed her fingers on the tabletop. “So what's your point?”

Mills zoomed in. “What made you suddenly sleep with the guy?” she bellowed. “And it's a little hard for me to believe a man like Rick would be 'blah' in bed.”

Zanita hiked her shoulders. “I don't know why. Maybe I was curious.”

“Curious? What kind of a reason is that?”

“I don't know!”

“I can understand passion, or a mad, wild fling, or even good old-fashioned

horniness, but curiosity?”

“Get off my case, will you?”

Mills felt instantly contrite. “I’m sorry, Zani, it was just so unlike you. You weren’t turned on in the least?”

Zanita grimaced. “No. And despite what you believe, ‘blah’ describes the experience perfectly. It was all over very quickly.”

Mills lowered her voice to what she deemed a serious tone. “Did you ... ?”

“No.” Zanita ran her index finger around the rim of her cup; she was about to make a terrible confession. “Mills, I’ve— *I’ve never.*”

Mills eyebrows shot up. “Not ever?”

Zanita sunk further into her chair.

“Nope.”

“Not even with Steve?”

She sighed. “Not even with Steve.”

Both women were silent for a few moments, the absolute seriousness of the subject demanding the proper respect.

Zanita took a gulp of coffee. “Do you think it's me? I don't think it's me.”

Mills was outraged. “Of course it isn't you!”

The two friends sat in silence pondering the dilemma.

Finally, Zanita broke the silence. “Well, what is it, then?”

As was Mills' habit when she was deep in thought, she took a large sip of coffee, then slowly lowered her mug to the table. Zanita knew she wouldn't speak until the sound of the cup hitting

the table had faded away. At that precise moment, Zanita could count on Mills having an inspiration.

Here it comes, she thought; the woman's a genius.

Mills looked straight at her and pronounced, "It wasn't right."

Zanita's violet eyes blinked twice. "That's it? It wasn't right?" She dropped her head to the table. "Jeez, Mills, give me a break."

"Think about it."

"No." Came the muffled reply from the tabletop.

"Think about it. With Steve, subconsciously you never really trusted him— for good reason, I might add— so you couldn't ... let your guard down, so

to speak. There was always something missing. As for Rick— ”

Zanita lifted her head slightly from the table. “Please, no more psychobabble, I beg you.”

Mills continued unperturbed. “With Rick, there was *nothing*. No passion. No lust. Ergo *no fulfillment*.”

Zanita sat back up. “You really think so?”

“Yes. Zanita, I've known you practically all my life. When you're in doubt about something, you always hold back. You withdraw into yourself.”

“I do?” She thought about it a moment. “You're right. I do. I never realized that before.”

“On the other hand, when you feel

strongly about something, you jump right into it, head first, no holds barred.”

Zanita's tone became distinctly cool. “Are you saying I leap before I look?”

“Drop the affronted act. Face it, girlfriend, you are not by nature a person who is concerned about the end justifying the means.”

“Meaning?”

Mills stretched her arms out.

“Meaning, you act first, then live with the consequences later.”

“So, Dr. Ruth, what does this all have to do with my problem?”

“Everything. When you meet a man who makes you leap before you look, you will be just fine.”

“Well, I have nothing to worry about,

do I?" she asked sarcastically. "We both know there isn't a man in existence who could befuddle me in that manner."

Mills started giggling, saw Zanita's expression, and quickly placed a hand over her mouth.

"What is so funny? You are supposed to be my friend."

"It's just that I suddenly got this mental picture of some man coming along, tricking you into playing the shell game, and when you don't guess correctly, throwing you over his shoulder and hauling you off to bed."

Their eyes met and they both burst out laughing.

"Talk about slight of hand ... " This caused another round of laughter.

“Please— “ Zanita gasped, holding her sides.

“The hand,” Mills giggled, “is quicker than the eye!”

“Stop!”

“N-now you see it— “ Mills couldn't finish, she was laughing so hard.

Zanita groaned. “That's terrible.”

Mills wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “Oh, I needed that. Didn't you say something about a seminar tonight?”

“Yes, thanks for reminding me— I need to get down to the student union at Hampshire to sign up for it.” Zanita reached for a cookie on the table.

Mills automatically joined her. “I hate these damn things.”

“Then why do you buy them?”

“Because they're so good.” She took a big bite out of the cookie.

“They are good— give me another one.”

“Here, take the whole bag— please.” She pushed the bag to Zanita. Zanita pushed it back.

“No way. I couldn't stand to see them staring at me in the middle of the night.”

“They never last to the middle of the night here.” Mills sighed as she took another cookie. “So what's the seminar on?”

“Psychic development,” she mumbled around a chocolate chip.

“I didn't know you were interested in stuff like that.”

“I'm not— I want to do a piece on this

guy who's been going around telling people he's a psychic healer. I've heard some disturbing things about him, but I haven't been able to substantiate anything yet. I thought if I went to a legitimate class on the subject, I could pick up some background information.”

“The paper sent you on this story? They're finally letting you do some investigative reporting?”

“Not exactly. I'm doing this on my own.”

“Is that wise?”

“I need to do this, Mills. I have to get off garden party assignments. All the Chief ever gives me to cover is fluff. How am I going to get at the good stories unless I take the initiative on my own?”

“Maybe he doesn't want you getting hurt. Stuff like that can be dangerous, Zanita. We both know Hank is a nice old relic from a prior century, but he's been around the block. Maybe he's looking out for you.”

“Cripes, Mills, I'm twenty-seven years old! I don't need a curmudgeon of a boss who acts like my grandfather.”

“The curmudgeon *is* your grandfather.”

“That's beside the point. He used to be a great reporter. In his heyday, he exposed racketeers and gangsters. And a lot of political corruption. I cut my teeth on his stories.”

“That was a long time ago. I think Hank is quite content with his small-

town newspaper. And every now and then he does keep the selectmen on their toes.”

Zanita drank the last of her coffee.

“True, but I'm not content. If I can get a *story*, I can go to a major market.”

“You mean you'll have a legitimate excuse for abandoning Hank. He's put blood, sweat, and tears into that paper. Sure, it doesn't have a large circulation, but the people around here like it. What's more, they buy it. And you know why.”

Zanita closed her eyes. “Because they trust what they read in the *Patriot Sun*.” She regarded Mills. “All the more reason for me to get this story. Old Mrs. Haverhill gave this man lots of money because he told her he could cure her

stomach cancer with a healing. She died this morning.”

“I don't mean this to sound cold, Zani, but the woman had an incurable illness. She would've died anyway.”

“True, but she didn't deserve to be bilked and lied to. He took terrible advantage of her when she was in an extremely vulnerable position. It was contemptible.”

“I agree. But not all psychic healing is bunk. I've read that many medical practitioners are incorporating the technique into their practices.”

“Yes, which makes it even more important to expose the frauds. There are some people who could genuinely benefit from it. If these people end up

with a charlatan, it's a tragedy.”

“A double tragedy in most cases, I'm sure.”

Zanita glanced at her watch. “I've got to run. Thanks for the tea and sympathy.”

“You mean coffee and sympathy. Let me know how the class went.”

Zanita nodded as she slung her enormous purse over her shoulder and headed out the door.

About an hour's drive west of the city of Boston, the picturesque town of Stockboro, Massachusetts, was surrounded by lovely rolling hills and green pastures. This peaceful, verdant land had once hosted a small but

significant skirmish during the Revolutionary War, and the historical setting was the perfect backdrop for an Ivy League campus. In the mid-eighteen hundreds, the town leaders had planted the seed, and Hampshire University was duly harvested.

The community itself was an eclectic blend of intellectuals, jazz musicians, artists, a smattering of bluebloods, surviving sixties drop-outs, and farmers. All dyed-in-the-wool Yankees.

It was an interesting community, where locals tolerated all viewpoints, but were extremely vocal about their own. Everyone was always up in arms over something— a hold-over from Revolutionary days, no doubt.

Zanita loved Stockboro. It was a place where things always seemed to be happening. Alive, moving, and vibrant, its citizens were active in the community and cared about the town they lived in. In short, it was a perfect town for a newspaper.

Despite what Zanita had said to Mills, she did not want to leave the *Patriot Sun*; her greener pastures were right here at home. What she did want was for the Chief to give her some meatier assignments. She knew all too well that she was going to have to show the Chief she was ready in black-and-white.

The course she hoped to take tonight would provide good background information for her story. Zanita planned

to do a series of articles on the subject of psychic healing. Knowing the opinionated citizens of Stockboro, she was pretty sure she could stir up a real hornet's nest with the piece.

Swinging her car into the lot by the student union, Zanita got directions from a young coed to the sign-up desk. There, she approached a middle-aged woman, who handed her a listing of the extension classes and special seminars being offered.

Quickly scanning the list, she checked off her choice and handed it back to the woman behind the desk, who was in the process of hanging up the phone.

“This is your lucky day.”

Zanita looked up from a circular a

student had just handed her. “What do you mean?”

“The class you marked has been filled up since the moment it was announced. I just hung up the phone on a last-minute cancellation.”

“You're kidding!” She had no idea psychic healing classes were so popular. And if the classes were popular, her articles would really hit the—

The woman interrupted Zanita's thoughts. “Oh-oh.”

“What 'oh-oh'?”

“I'm sorry, I should've guessed—there's a huge waiting list for this class.”

She saw her article flying out the window. “Oh, but you can't!” The woman looked at her strangely. “I mean,

I have to take this class. It's really important to me. Please?"

The woman seemed uncomfortable to be put in this position. Zanita decided to press her momentary advantage.

"You might not even be able to get in touch with any of those people on that list at this late time. The class is going to start in an hour. Here I am, ready and willing to attend. How will it look with an empty seat? Besides, you yourself said it was fate."

The woman threw up her hands in surrender. "Okay, okay! You're in. Just don't tell anyone what I did." She stamped the form.

"My lips are sealed. Thanks a lot—I really appreciate this."

“You should— I've dealt with some of these people on the waiting list, and they can get weird when they don't get what they want.”

Zanita's violet eyes opened wide. Perhaps she could get a tip-off here? She leaned toward the woman, whispering, “Weird how?”

“Oh, the usual. They throw an academic tantrum of some kind, and somebody gets rearranged. No one would dare mess with that department.”

“Why not?” Zanita took out her pen and pad.

The woman said seriously, “Because they know how to make your house glow in the dark.” Then she winked. “Lecture hall 223. Have a nice day.”

Zanita was still gaping at the woman in horror as she turned away to help another student.

Do these psychics intimidate people with their so-called abilities! Was that how Xavier LaLeche was able to convince poor Mrs. Haverhill to hand over her bank books? She made a mental note to investigate this angle.

She had just enough time to get a hamburger at the cafeteria. By the time she got to the lecture hall, it was fairly filled. Spotting an empty chair in the third row, she made her way down the stairs, quickly taking the seat. It was strange, but she seemed to be the only woman there.

Her eyes flicked over the chairs in the

hall. All men!

And a scruffy lot they were, too.

She briefly felt like tugging on the hem of her short skirt, only none of them seemed to be paying the slightest bit of attention to her legs.

Why not!

She purposely crossed them. Still no response. Very curious.

There was a buzz of excitement racing through the hall which had nothing to do with the shape of her legs. An odd little man sitting next to her confided to her how happy he was to be attending this seminar. His owlsh eyes peered at her from behind Coke-bottle glasses as he extended a pudgy hand to her in greeting.

“Stan Mazurski.”

She shook his hand. “Zanita Masterson.”

“I can't wait to hear him, you know.” The little man shook with enthusiasm. “He's quite a maverick— radical in a lot of his viewpoints, but so very brilliant. One of the greatest minds of our times.”

So the lecturer had all the earmarks of a cult leader. She was supposed to be impressed with this? “I wouldn't know.”

“You've never seen him before? I have— once when I was at Cern, I flew to The Hague to hear him give a talk.”

Typical groupie. Poor man. She'd seen his type before. “I hope it was worth it.” Her response was dry.

“Oh, yes! He was inspiring, I'll tell you. Turned my thinking around

completely.”

Damn! Here she thought she was attending a legitimate lecture— not about to hear some cult leader pontificate to his adoring masses. Well, she'd give the guy a chance; there was no sense judging him by one crazed fan. But if his talk even smacked of hoodoo chicanery, she was out of there.

“I hear they offered him a permanent chair at the Institute for Advanced Studies.”

This was encouraging, although she had never heard of a psychic research center bearing that name. There was only one university she knew of that had done psychic research, and she had heard they closed the department down. Perhaps

she had heard wrong. “Duke University?”

The round eyes blinked twice behind the thick lenses. “N-no, Princeton.”

Well! More encouraging still. She would reserve judgment.

“He turned it down.”

Zanita was about to ask him why, when the double doors to the front of the lecture pit opened, and five men entered the room. Four of the men surrounded one man in the center, eagerly seeking his opinion on various subjects. Even though he was surrounded, Zanita had no trouble seeing him, for he stood head and shoulders above the other men.

He was sinfully handsome.

The second thing she noticed about

him was his build. The man worked out — no question about it. It was the best body she had seen in years— maybe ever. He was wearing washed-out denims that hugged sleek thighs. His white tailored shirt was unbuttoned at the collar, the sleeves rolled back to the elbow, revealing muscular forearms.

He had very long chestnut hair, which was streaked golden. It was smoothed back from his face and hung down his back in a ponytail. His skin was a rich golden tan; it complemented his tawny hair color, evoking images of sultry tropical heat ...

Someone said something to him which made him smile, causing him to reveal engaging, almost mischievous dimples.

Then another person garnered his attention, probably not very interesting, because as this person continued to talk to him, he raised his sights and glanced around the lecture hall.

For a moment, his sharp gaze lit on Zanita before moving on.

She noticed that his eyes were clear, ice blue in contrast to his warm coloring, and seemed to spark with a keen intelligence. In his mid-thirties, his persona conveyed a man possessed of alluring, esoteric knowledge.

The man was captivating.

Zanita swallowed, reassessing her original impression. He wasn't just sinfully handsome; he was outrageously *sexy*.

“Who is he?” she whispered to Stan.

Stan looked up from a manual he was reading. “Who?”

Who? As if she would be asking about anyone else in the room! “The tall guy in the center!”

Stan pushed his glasses back on the bridge of his nose. “That's him!”

“Who?” Zanita gritted out.

“Tyberius Augustus Evans.”

The name tickled the back of her mind, but she couldn't quite place it.

“Wait till you hear him speak!”

Zanita was surprised. So this was the psychic guru Stan had been gushing about. Her mouth parted slightly. Of course, charisma was an important part of his profession, so Zanita shouldn't

have been so affected by his appearance. But she was. She hadn't been expecting someone that looked like ... *him*.

This was going much better than she could have hoped for. Even if his talk was boring, she could while away the time just staring at him. She relaxed in her chair.

Wait until she told Mills about this!

“So, who wants to define Chaos?” Appreciative laughter echoed across the room. Tyberius Augustus Evans rested against the desk in a casual pose, arms crossed over his chest.

His question was the first thing Zanita had understood in the fifteen minutes the

man had been talking. He had begun giving her strange looks when he drew something on the board to illustrate a point he was making, and she crossed her eyes. Since then, his glance had strayed her way every now and then, his expression not unlike Mills' earlier in the day. The mysterious face of Mars look.

She had never realized that psychic healing was so ... *obtuse*. At last something she could understand. Who would have thought the man would ask a trivia question? She tentatively raised her hand.

Tyber's eyebrows rose as the small hand went up. It had been a rhetorical question. He did not expect anyone to try

an answer. More to the point, phrased that way, no one *could* answer it. He looked warily at the young woman with the remarkable violet eyes in the third row. “Yes?”

“KAOS were the bad guys who went against CONTROL on the TV show *Get Smart*.“

Dead silence followed her comment.

A rich, deep laugh broke through the silence, echoing in a room which had gone as still as a tomb.

Tyber, still laughing, grinned up at her. “You're right, Ms.— ?”

“Masterson, Zanita.”

“Named after the manzanita tree, no doubt.”

Zanita's mouth dropped open. “How

did you—”

He turned back to the class. “Along with Ms. Masterson's definition, Chaos is also a behavior. This behavior has three properties: It is ergodic; it occurs in systems with a few degrees of freedom; and it displays sensitive dependence on initial conditions.”

“*Excuse me.*” Zanita spoke up. “But what does this have to do with healing?”

Tyber stared at her, speechless for a moment. He couldn't recall that ever happening to him before. “Nothing.”

He was giving her that look again. “Oh.” She thought about it a moment. “Are you talking about crystals?” Psychics seemed to be enamored of crystals.

The man suddenly became very interested. "In what manner?"

"Well ... I hear the vibrations ..."

He jumped on her words. "You mean the resonance? I hadn't thought about that before. Go on," he urged her.

"I— I— " She threw up her hands, at a loss. "They transmit energy?"

He looked at her, astonished. "That's brilliant!"

Zanita scrunched her shoulders and warily glanced around the room. She had no idea what he had been talking about, and now she had no idea what *she* had been talking about. But he thought he knew what she was talking about.

The man was a kook.

She peeked at him. A gorgeous kook,

but a kook. Time to leave.

She started to stand, adjusting the shoulder strap on her bag. “Look, I— ”

He walked purposely towards her, his glance briefly flicking to her legs. At least *he* noticed; the thought danced at the back of her mind. At the forefront of her mind was getting away from this nutcake pronto.

“You realize that pendulum action is quite different, even when— why are you backing up the stairs?”

“I really, *really* have to go. You see, I didn't realize psychic healing was so intense, and I— ”

“*Psychic healing?*“ There it was again. That speechless sensation. He focused on her with interest now. “This

is a physics seminar.”

She looked totally confused, and, he had to admit, rather adorable.

“How did you— “ His eyes twinkled in sudden amusement as he correctly assessed the situation. “Ahh. Not much of a speller, are you?”

Zanita blanched. “Physics?” she mouthed.

“Physics,” he affirmed.

“Yuck!” She quickly looked at him. “I’m sorry, that just sort of— slipped out, Mr. Evans. I mean, Mr. Doctor— I mean, Dr. Evans.” God, she sounded like a total jerk! Now the man was laughing at her!

He grinned, flashing her a dimple. “Tyber will do.”

The whole class started laughing. Zanita wanted to crawl up the stairs and out the door. She started backing up the stairs again, feeling like a complete idiot. Tyber Evans just kept on advancing, totally enjoying the situation.

“You, Ms. Masterson, are unpredictable— what we physicists would call a random element. Very interesting ...”

“Random element! Thanks a lot. You make me sound like some— some— ”

Tyber raised an eyebrow as if daring her to complete the sentence accurately. *Arrogant* kook. She raised her chin in the air. “If you'll excuse me?”

“Not so fast.” He folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the

wall. “Not much on physics, are you?”

She stopped a moment to get her bearings. The sight of him leaning against the wall, smiling devilishly at her, had unnerved her. *Jeez, he was gorgeous.* She twisted a curl of her hair, a habit she had when nervous. “Well ...”

“Hmm ... as I suspected.” He tapped his chin with a forefinger. “You know, I could open up a whole new universe for you. Why don't you stay for the course? I realize much of this won't mean anything to you, but you might pick up some intriguing ideas along the way. Much better than psychic healing classes. Of course, I'm prejudiced.”

The man was asking her to stay in the class. Physics ... *bor-r-ring*. How was

she going to politely refuse this paragon in front of all these people? She decided to hedge and give him a way out. "I don't know. It's a little ... dry."

His eyes sparkled. She knew right then he was not going to take the bait.

"*Dry?* Now you've challenged me, Zanita. I'm going to show you how *exciting* it can be."

He was talking about physics, wasn't he? By his expression, she wasn't so sure. Well, she had given him his out and he chose not to take it. "Thanks a lot, but —"

"No thanks necessary. The joy is in the teaching." His eyes danced as if they held secrets he would be more than willing to share with her. He came up on

the same step and placed a warm hand at her back, gently but firmly urging her back to her seat.

“It's like this: you blundered in here, now we're going to keep you. Right, lads?” He addressed the class at large.

The class heartily concurred. Not that Zanita expected them to do anything else. It was obvious that the sun rose and set on this man as far as they were concerned.

Stan turned in his seat, grinning up at her. “You're stuck with us, Zanita.”

She turned to look up at Tyber, who stood over her shoulder. He knew very well he had cornered her.

He winked! Who was he to ...

She suddenly remembered where she

had heard his name before.

Tyberius Augustus Evans was a brilliant, renowned eccentric, who held thousands of patents on various devices and was sought out by heads of state, scientists, business corporations, research facilities— in short, by anyone who thought they could get something from him. His explorations, which he conducted in the privacy of his walled estate, took him down various paths of endeavor. From what she remembered, some were sublime; some seemed to her sort of silly. But who was she to judge? The general consensus was that everything he produced displayed the rare genius he was known for.

What else could she recall? Ah, yes.

He worked strictly by himself; in other words, he did not owe his soul to the company store. He guarded his privacy, and he never, *never*, gave an interview.

She smiled slowly at him. *Random element, indeed.*

The information she needed on psychic healing she could pick up elsewhere. She still fully intended to investigate Xavier LaLeche, but a class on psychic healing wasn't anywhere near as important as the possibility of gaining an interview with this man.

In a lightning display of deductive reasoning that would have fascinated Tyber had he been aware of it, Zanita calculated her chances. There was no real decision to make.

“I'll stay.” The class applauded, but she barely noticed. Her sights were on Tyberius Augustus Evans.

Tyber narrowed his eyes slightly as he studied the woman in front of him. She had the look of his cat. Yes, when the cat was about to do something very cunning.

Tyber smiled to himself. He always loved a mystery.

He knew exactly what to do next.

The first step was to test the water. As she was taking her seat, he decided to shake her up a bit. Just to get it rolling.

“I'm going to follow up on that idea of yours.”

She looked up at him in horror. Had he seen through her already? “What

idea?" Her voice wavered.

"Vibration." He leaned down to whisper in her ear. "Energy." His warm breath tickled the side of her neck.

"Resonance ..."

She swallowed nervously, refusing to look at him. It was uncomfortably obvious to Zanita that for whatever reason, the man had taken up the challenge.

It was also obvious that he intended to enjoy it.

She sighed as her earlier conversation with Mills passed through her mind. Here was the perfect justification for her convictions. Damn, but he had a mischievous look on his handsome face.

Nothing was ever simple when a man

was involved.

Boil them in oil.

Chapter Two

“That is why, in later years, Newton was responsible for send-ing several men to their death on the gallows. We physicists don't get mad; we get even.”

The class laughed appreciatively at what Zanita suspected was in-house humor.

“Those of you who know me,” Tyber went on, “know that I'm not much for a structured academic environment. What say we meet tomorrow night at Mickey D's on Route Nine?”

“The playground?” someone yelled

out from the back of the room, making everyone laugh.

Tyber grinned. “Not a bad idea, but I'd hate to have to defend my place in line at the slide— some of those kids are meaner than I am. I think inside should be acceptable. How many of you can make it?” Almost the whole class raised their hands. Zanita was a noticeable exception.

“That many. I don't think we should have too much of a problem, as it's after the dinner hour. Okay, so tomorrow night — same time, different location.” The class applauded the lecture as they vacated their seats.

Tyber's icy eyes lit on Zanita. “Ms. Masterson. I wonder if I might have a

few words with you before you leave?"

Zanita, who had been slinging her bag over her shoulder, looked up in surprise and nodded.

Tyber, having got her consent, turned to a colleague who was asking him a question.

By the time Zanita made her way to the front, Dr. Evans was already surrounded by a group of sycophants who were panting around him like starving academic dogs— not that she wouldn't have liked to pant around him as well, but for entirely different reasons.

She waited patiently toward the back of the small crowd for the intellectual fallout to clear. After about fifteen

minutes, Zanita started getting impatient, as the adoring masses did not seem to be thinning out. She was weighing the prospect of leaving against the slim chance of gaining an interview this evening when Tyber glanced her way and skillfully called a halt to the chit-chat, promising to continue the discussion tomorrow evening.

The room emptied so fast, you might have thought an air raid siren had gone off.

Of course, these guys would have gone *toward* ground zero, not away from it.

Zanita smiled to herself; it had certainly been an interesting evening.

Tyber folded his arms across his chest

and leaned back against the desk. “You didn't like the class, did you?”

Zanita was surprised. “Why do you say that?” She thought she had managed to hide her confusion very well.

“You didn't raise your hand when I asked who could make it tomorrow evening. And there was that other thing ...”

“What other thing?”

“The way you kept crossing your eyes whenever I drew an illustration on the board.”

Zanita cleared her throat. “All right, I'll admit I wasn't overly enthused, but I did warn you.” She threw her arms up. “Frankly, I had no idea what you were talking about.”

“So, just because you were lost in a fog you're not coming tomorrow? Really, what kind of a reason is that? Most people go through their whole lives not understanding a damn thing. In that context, what's a few evenings spent in my lectures by comparison?”

His obtuse reasoning completely escaped her. She blinked. “What?”

“Tomorrow will be quite different— I promise. No mathematics of any kind. That's why I suggested the restaurant; not having blackboards will keep it honest.” His smile was heart-stopping.

She decided then and there that nothing would keep her from going tomorrow night— interview or not. What sane woman would forego the

pleasure of discreetly ogling him?
Besides, whatever made him think she
wouldn't come?

“I never said I wasn't coming. You
assumed that because my hand didn't go
up when you expected it to. I had every
intention of going; I just wasn't in the
mood to admit it.”

Tyber stared at her, speechless.
Again. When he did speak, his voice
held a note of awe. “You are completely
non-linear, Zanita.”

She waved her hand. “I have no idea
what that means, but I suspect it has
something to do with the mysterious face
of Mars looks I get— see? Like that one
you're wearing now.”

“Fascinating,” he muttered. “So, you

are coming?”

“Yeah. See ya tomorrow night, Doc.” She waved goodbye as she headed quickly up the stairs, before Tyber had a chance to say another word.

It wasn't until she got to her car that she wondered why it mattered to him whether she showed up or not.

“Mills, he is to die for.”

Zanita plowed her fork into the carton of Chinese take-out she had brought over to her friend's house.

“We are talking about the physicist, aren't we?” Mills asked around an eggroll. “Somehow I can't quite picture
— ”

“Trust me. To Die For. Of course I can't figure out what he's talking about half the time. I mean, you'd have to be a rocket scientist to understand—”

“He *is* a rocket scientist.” Mills pointed out.

“Oh, yeah.” Zanita shrugged. “At any rate, this is the best assignment I've ever had. If he would grant me an interview, just think—”

“He's not an assignment.”

Zanita looked at her. “Well, no, not exactly ...”

“What makes you think he'll give you an interview when he's turned down everyone else? No offense, Zanita, but you're not exactly Edward R. Murrow, or even Barbara Walters, or for that

matter Yolanda Neade.” Yolanda Neade was a ditsy local newscaster on a non-network-affiliated television station. Mills wasn't pulling any punches.

“This is true, but I have something they don't have.”

Mills looked at her friend askance. “What, pray tell, is that?”

Zanita batted her eyelashes. “I am *non-linear*.”

“Say what?”

“I have no idea, either, but Doc Evans seemed very interested in it.”

Mills snorted. “Uh-huh. As Whoopi said, 'Girl, you in danger'.”

Zanita grinned. “I wish. Believe me, the man is odd. Gorgeous, but odd. The most I can hope for is an interview with

him. And I would be more than satisfied with that.”

“Satisfied is the operative word here. Maybe he's the one.”

Zanita swallowed a cashew. “The one what?”

“To *befuddle* you.”

“Befuddle me as in make me crazy, roll around in the hay, knock my socks off, befuddle?” Mills nodded lecherously. “Tyber? I don't think so. I mean, he does have a body that won't quit, and he is sexy beyond words, but ...”

“But?”

“He's ... a kook.”

Mills raised an eyebrow as if to say, When has this little aberration ever

stopped a hot-blooded man?

“No. No, believe me, you have this all wrong. I'm sure he would never notice me in that way. He probably isn't interested in such base interactions, being so ... so intellectually lofty.”

“Right.”

“Seriously. He might see me as interesting in some bizarre way known only to him.” She thought of his expression and the tone of his voice when he had told her he was going to follow up on her idea, whatever *that* had been. “But only because he thinks he can teach me to understand what he's talking about.”

Mills choked on her tea. “Zanita! I have no idea what you are saying! Do

you?”

“Well, no. But don't blame me— it's Tyber's doing. No one could possibly understand a thing he says.” She sighed. “This is not going to be a piece of cake.”

As if her words were an omen, when she walked into the fast-food restaurant, Tyber was wolfing down a piece of cake a little girl had handed him. He looked up as she approached the tables where several men from the class, including Stan, were eating hamburgers and fries.

The past twenty-four hours had, if anything, enhanced his appeal. He was

just as sexy as she remembered.

There was something about the man that invited touching.

His incredible pecs couched inside the soft cotton of his casual shirt, perhaps? His strong column of toasty warm throat? The boyishly intriguing dimples in his mischievous smile? The incredible intelligence behind his eyes?

It struck her anew how very different he was— not what one would expect at all.

“Hi. Want a sip?” He held out his chocolate shake to her. She eyed the drink dubiously, remembering the pasty taste from her high school years all too well.

“No, thank you. Who's the kid?”

Tyber shrugged. "It's her birthday. She gave us all a piece of her cake. Whether we wanted it or not." He winked at her. "Fortunately, I'm a sucker for frosting." He licked a dollop off his finger.

It was an innocent gesture on his part, but for some reason Zanita couldn't take her eyes off that tongue slowly swirling around the edge of his long, beautifully tapered finger. The gesture so fascinated her that she stood riveted, watching him.

"I did promise you I'd be honest tonight."

"Wh-what?" Her face rose guiltily to his.

"The lecture." His eyes sparked expressively in his incredibly handsome face. "I think after tonight I'll have you

hooked.”

“Hooked?” She knew she sounded like a parroting idiot, but she couldn't get the sight of that sensuously swirling tongue out of her mind. Why did he have to look so sinfully delicious? What would that tongue feel like swirling against— “Like peanut butter to jelly,” he affirmed.

She swallowed convulsively, dispelling the image *that* provoked.

Tyber scooted over in the booth, making room for her to sit down.

Stan, having devoured his mountain of ground beef and grease; noticed her as she took her seat. “So you haven't given up on us, eh, Zanita? Good for you!”

Zanita glanced sideways at Tyber,

who smiled softly at her. Even seated, he seemed to tower over her. “I didn't really have a choice, Stan.”

Stan, completely misinterpreting her remark, replied, “I know what you mean. Doctor Evans is inspirational!” He grinned broadly at Tyber, who winced under the unexpurgated devotion.

Looking around the restaurant, he said, “We might as well start this.”

He levered himself up on top of the back of the seat, straddling two booths with his long, jean-clad legs, and addressed the group. “I thought tonight we'd informally discuss artificial intelligence and some related topics ...”

While Tyber spoke, the ultimate artificial life form, the restaurant clown,

listened in, peering over Stan's shoulder intently, his orange hair glowing under the fluorescent lighting. Several stragglers from the class wandered in. Eventually they had to move out to the playground to make room for everybody. Even the clown followed them outside, his broom dragging on the ground behind him.

There in the playground, under the stars, with a gentle breeze in the night air, Tyber spoke of the mysteries of the universe from the top of a slide. Zanita thought him the most interesting and unconventional man she had ever seen.

Frogs croaked, shooting stars fell, owls hooted, and trees rustled in the wind as he discussed, in plain terms,

bringing together seemingly dichotomous subjects such as absolutism underlying relativistic principles.

What fascinated Zanita most was his way of taking several divergent topics and bringing them together into a cohesive unit, pointing out similarities in subjects not often talked about synonymously. He was brilliant.

He was a man captivated by ideas, both the sublime and the ridiculous. His genuine curiosity about every aspect of the nature of the universe was contagious. The group was entranced by his enthusiasm as he delved into explorations of both the known and the unknown.

“Facts always remain absolute,” he

said. "It's everyone's point of view that is different, relativistic, although, paradoxically, everyone believes 'their' point of view is the correct or 'proper' one. As Einstein pointed out quite a while ago: 'I'm right and everything else is relative.' If one listens to two politicians in a political debate, one is observing the Theory of Relativity." Everyone laughed.

"And on that note, I believe we'll call it a night. I thought it might be interesting if we caught the new science fiction picture playing at the cinema at the mall in Stockboro tomorrow. I hear there are some intriguing ideas at work on the nature of space travel and xenobiology. We can have an open discussion

afterwards if anyone's interested.” Everyone was very much interested—including the clown, who asked if he could join in. He was assured he could.

Tyber caught up to Zanita in the parking lot as she was heading for her car.

“So— how was that? Did I keep my promise?”

Zanita smiled at him. “You did. In spite of myself, I was fascinated like everyone else.”

“Hmm... not quite what I was aiming at, but it is a start.”

She reached her car and unlocked the door. “As a friend told me recently, in certain matters I would do well to leap before I look.” Of course, Mills had

been referring to a totally different subject. “You have piqued my interest, Doc. I will be there tomorrow night.”

He placed his hands against the door of her car, leaning down to speak to her through the open window. “It is you who has piqued my interest, Zanita. Did I tell you I have a cat? No? Well, I do. Good night.”

Now what did he mean by that? she wondered.

The following evening, she waited for the group in the lobby of the movie theater, trying desperately to stay awake. She had gone to visit her grandparents at their farm last evening after the class.

Her grandfather had been sitting out on the front porch, idly rocking on the swing, enjoying the unusually balmy October weather. The natives called it Indian summer, and every New Englander knew to enjoy the brief respite while it lasted, for it presaged the coming winter.

As usual, it didn't take long before they were heatedly “discussing” a current topic of town politics. Zanita always liked engaging Hank in such discussions, often playing devil's advocate just to rile the old man. Hank was something when he got going on a subject he cared about; and Hank really cared about everything that went on in Stockboro, and for that matter, the world

at large. In her opinion, it was one of the traits that had made him a great reporter. No story was ever *just* a story to him.

Unfortunately, she had succeeded only too well in riling him up, for the discussion went on well past midnight, with neither one of them aware of the time. It wasn't until her grandmother came out onto the porch dressed in her robe to shoo them inside that they came to their senses.

Due to the hour, Zanita elected to spend the night in her old bedroom. When she made her decision, she hadn't counted on The Hogs hitting town.

It was around two in the morning when the pack squealed into the backyard, reminding her of a motorcycle

gang storming into a town for the fun of causing mayhem. The “defiant ones” snorted and snuffled in glee, causing her to sit bolt upright in bed.

She cautiously lifted the shade on the window in time to see the little picket fence which surrounded her grandmother's rose garden crash over. Stomping pig feet echoed in the night.

Her grandmother's garden was trampled in a random display of violence before the herd inexplicably moved on.

Hank was fit to be tied.

The Hogs resided with their neighbor, Joe Sprit, who lived several miles down the road. Every now and then, for reasons known only to The Hogs, they

escaped their pen to take a midnight foray through the town. It had been going on for years. Zanita referred to it in her goofier moments as “The Night of The Hogs.”

Since no one was sure how to deal with the problem, they tended to live with it. Joe claimed he had reinforced the fencing several times, but somehow, when The Hogs wanted out; they got out. When a Hog had mayhem on its mind, there was little a human could do.

So now, she ruminated facetiously, she was just grist for the Hog mill. Deciding that some fresh air might revive her, she walked outside to the front of the theater. It wasn't long before she saw Tyber pulling into the lot on the

back of a Harley-Davidson. Somehow she was not surprised.

He slung his helmet over the bars, spotting her at once. Smiling a greeting, he walked her way, looking altogether too sensuous and sinewy. He wore black, thigh-hugging jeans with black boots. A gray shirt and cuffs turned back on his forearms completed the dangerous look. His long hair was tied back, once again, in a ponytail. She wondered what it would look like loose about his shoulders, silently thanking him for not putting her through that torture.

“Waiting for me?” He greeted her with a grin.

Unashamedly arrogant. “Getting some air. Everyone's waiting for you inside.”

He nodded, steering her through the door. “I have a confession to make— I really wanted to see this picture, and I hate going to the movies alone.”

“So you engineered it so the whole class would accompany you? Talk about abuse of power ...”

“Afraid so. I'll tell you what— to make it up to you, I'll buy your ticket. But you have to buy the popcorn.”

“What kind of a deal is that? The popcorn in this place is more than my rent.”

“I never said I was stupid.” He winked at her, revealing that engaging dimple.

After greeting the class and telling them to meet after the movie in the mall

court, he drew her determinedly over to the refreshment stand.

“A jumbo deluxe popcorn,” he told the girl behind the counter.

“Thanks a lot! Why don't you get Stan to buy your popcorn for you? I'm sure he'd be more than willing.”

He considered her question for a moment. “Because Stan doesn't have legs like yours.”

That shut her up. He *had* noticed. “You shouldn't talk to your students like that.”

He threw her a look. “You're not a student, and this is not a classroom. It's a seminar— for *colleagues*.” He fished his wallet out of his back pocket to pay the girl.

“I am not a colleague of yours, and I said I would pay for that.”

“I'm aware of that. As for the popcorn — I was joking.”

“But— ”

“Let's go see the movie.”

As he led her to their seats, she got the uncomfortable feeling that she had somehow been maneuvered into a date without ever agreeing to one, or for that matter being asked to one. The sneaking suspicion crossed her mind that Tyber could have manipulated the entire class just for that purpose. But that was absurd. Why would he do such a thing?

She felt an elbow nudge her side.

“You're falling asleep again, Ms. Masterson. I don't mind, but the two rows behind us are complaining about your snores.”

“I don't snore.” She mumbled, falling into a doze again.

Jab.

“Will you quit it?”

“Why are you so tired?” he whispered low in her ear, sending a frisson down her bare neck. “Is my company that boring?” His heated breath teased against her.

“No, it's The Hogs,” she murmured sleepily, turning unconsciously toward his warmth.

He was amused by both her response and her action; she was just short of

snuggling into him. He casually put his arm around her, drawing her closer, pitching his voice low. “I beg your pardon?”

“The Hogs were on the prowl last night— God, you smell good.” She promptly fell back asleep.

Hogs? What hogs? He looked askance at the sleeping bundle of woman in his arms. Curiouser and curiouser, he thought. And soft. Definitely soft.

He decided he liked the feel of her sleeping in his arms.

She awoke toward the end of the

movie, mortified to find herself burrowed into Tyber's chest. Worse yet, she had managed to fit her head into the crook of his neck, her forehead flush against the warm skin of his throat. His chin was resting on the top of her head as he watched the movie; his arm was casually draped across her shoulders.

This was so unprofessional of her! Thank God the rest of the group were scattered throughout the darkened theater. Hopefully, they were too engaged in the movie to pay any attention to the two of them.

Damn! How could she ever expect the man to take her seriously now? He'd never give her the interview she wanted. And how did one extricate oneself from

such a position gracefully?

Tyber's hand slowly rubbed her back, causing her to instantly stiffen.

"I know you're awake," he said into her hair.

"Can we pretend I didn't do this?" she asked in a small voice against his chest.

"Of course not." His husky tone held more than a hint of amusement.

Zanita quickly disengaged herself, affronted. "That's not very chivalrous of you."

Tyber did not seem particularly concerned about chivalry. "Do you often fall asleep in a public place in the arms of the person next to you?"

Before she could summon up a suitable retort, he grinned wickedly at

her. “You talk in your sleep.”

Zanita flushed, opened her mouth like a fish, then closed it. What had she said? Oh, God. Would he even tell her? Those damn Hogs!

She wisely stayed silent until the end of the picture, sitting ramrod straight in her chair, trying desperately not to look embarrassed.

When the movie ended Tyber took her hand as if he had every right to, leading her out to the mall court.

“Relax, Curls, you didn't say anything too revealing.” He scratched his chin in thought. “Except for the part about the sexual aids hidden in a shoebox under your bed.”

She stopped and stared at him,

horrified.

He laughed out loud. “It was just a lucky guess, really.”

She tried to tug her hand away from him; he held firm.

“I have no such thing! You're terrible
— ”

“That's not what you said in your sleep,” he teased.

She blushed crimson. Considering her shameless thoughts about him, she might have said anything. Anything at all. She ran her fingers through her hair in a nervous gesture. Forget the interview; this was too embarrassing to be endured. What must the man think of her?

“L-Look, Tyber, I really have to get going; it's late.”

“Oh, no you don't.” He laced his fingers through hers. “You're not running away. You tried that once before with me, and it didn't work.”

“Please, Doctor Evans ... this is so embarrassing.”

“You do seem to have a penchant for getting yourself into situations.” He smiled remorselessly at her while maintaining his firm hold on her hand.

“I do not!” His disbelieving look compelled a modicum of honesty.

“Okay; so sometimes I get myself into sticky— what did I say to you?” she demanded.

“You didn't say all that much in your sleep, Zanita.” He thought it tactful to leave out her comment about how good

he smelled. “Although I have to ask myself *why* you're so nervous about what you *think* you might have said.”

“You rat!” She blurted out before thinking. “You let me think I— “ She stopped abruptly, realizing what she had almost revealed.

“You were about to say?” He raised an eyebrow expectantly.

That you're gorgeous beyond words and I was wondering if you were as sexy in bed as you look. “You let me think that I might have revealed confidences entrusted to me by my friends,” she prevaricated.

“Your nose is growing. However, I apologize if I've embarrassed you in any way.” His voice was overly sincere.

“Let me buy you an ice cream cone so we can be friends again.”

“You may buy me an ice cream cone, but we are not exactly friends.”

“Nonsense; you've slept in my arms, Curls. What flavor would you like?”

“Monkey crunch and stop calling me by that ridiculous name.”

His gaze traveled assessingly over her short black hair. “Oh, I don't know— it seems to fit.” He ordered their cones, his eyes twinkling at her as if he were just waiting for her to snap back at him.

Was he purposely irritating her just to irritate her?

She was about to let him have it with both barrels when the rest of the group caught up with him. “Saved by the

cavalry.” Her tongue swirled around the ice cream as if to punctuate her statement.

“Lucky me,” he murmured. “Can I taste?” He didn't wait for her answer, leaning down to take a lick of her ice cream.

While his attention was focused on the cone in her hand, his head was on a level with hers. He slowly raised his eyelashes, meeting her eyes. Their lips were only a few inches apart.

He stared intently at her for several heart-stopping moments.

Zanita felt as if her stomach had fallen to the floor only to bounce back into her ribcage.

“Mmm— just what I like: not too

sweet, varied texture, unusual flavor, with a creamy consistency.” He licked the cone one more time, his eyes never leaving hers. “Want to try mine?”

He was shameless.

An unconventional, incredibly alluring, no-holds-barred kook!

Zanita *really* liked him.

He held his cone out to her. She tentatively licked his Coconut Brazilian Mud Rainbow Brownie Jubilee.

“Well?” He prompted her.

“It— it's *different*.”

“Different good or different yuck?”

He raised his brows in inquiry as if they were really talking about ice cream.

Zanita smiled secretively, not about to admit to anything. “I'm not sure yet.”

Tonight, the last of the lecture series, he spoke about magnetic sails powering spaceships, hydrogen mining around Jupiter, and cryogenics. All the while licking an ice cream cone.

The clown, who turned out to be an undergrad philosophy student, surprised everyone by intelligently adding his twist to the topic. Soon everyone was debating ethics instead of theory.

Zanita dived into the discussion with both feet, loving nothing better than a rousing debate. She was not at all intimidated by the totally male group. Hank had raised her to voice her opinions, and voice them she did. Several times, as she touted her viewpoint, she noticed Tyber watching

her intently, often unconsciously shaking his head in agreement with her comments.

The discussion was so lively, the group failed to notice that all the stores had closed and the lights were shutting off. Mall security ended up throwing them out.

Tyber thanked them all for coming to the class. Several of the members, including Stan, wondered if they might meet on a regular basis to continue the off-beat discussions. It was not what they had originally expected, but everyone had enjoyed it immensely.

Tyber, not without some amusement, said he would consider it. In truth, he had thrown away his original notes for

the last two classes in the hope of keeping one small, violet-eyed woman interested in coming to hear him.

But then, he knew, better than most, that some of the best discoveries in science and life were accidental in nature.

Stan pulled out a pad of paper, handing it around for everyone's name and phone number, which he then dutifully handed to Tyber, leaving the decision in his court, since he was the motivating factor. Zanita bet it did not escape any of the men here that being in a regular discussion group with Tyberius Augustus Evans would grant them a certain professional elitism.

Tyber folded the paper, placing it in

his shirt pocket, again thanking everyone for coming. Zanita wondered if he would actually pursue the group. From what she knew of him, she tended to doubt it; he was a maverick and a loner by nature.

The crowd wandered off, leaving the two of them conspicuously standing there.

“Zanita, would you—”

“Tyber, can I—”

They spoke at the same time.

They both laughed. Tyber gestured.

“You go first.”

“Tyber, I was wondering if ... well, I know you don't usually do this, I mean as far as I know, you've never done it, and I know you haven't known me long, but still, perhaps ...”

He grinned at her. “Zanita, what are you talking about? It can't possibly be what it sounds like.”

She swallowed, gathering her courage, knowing this was probably the only opportunity she'd have. “Would you give me an interview?”

He looked at her stunned. “*What?*”

“I'm a reporter for—”

His expression changed instantly. Gone was the smiling, approachable man. “I see. I should have known.” He seemed terribly disappointed for some reason. “Was it all an act? Blundering into class and—”

“No! I had no idea who you were; I mean, not right away. I meant to take a psychic healing class for a story I hope

to do and— ”

“I see. Opportunity knocked.” The sarcasm in his voice was evident. “No wonder you reminded me of my cat.”

Her shoulders slumped. This wasn't going at all well. And what was that crack about his cat?

“What paper?” he demanded in disgust. “*The Globe?*”

“No.”

“*Time?*”

“No.”

“*People?*”

“No.”

He looked at her inquiringly.

“*The Patriot Sun.*”

He seemed surprised at first; then he visibly relaxed, breaking into a huge

grin. “The Stockboro daily gazette?”

“You don't have to say it like that!”

“Like what?” He suddenly reached out, curling an arm around her neck to draw her close.

“Like you're— what are you doing?”

“Doing?” Despite his innocent gaze, he had a definite look of mischief about him. “Why, I'm answering your question. I'm relieved, Ms. Masterson. For a moment there, I thought you were a *real* reporter.”

Her violet eyes went glacial. “I *am* a real reporter.”

“Well, I'll try not to think of you as one.”

“Thank you very much!”

He leaned forward, surprising her by

kissing the tip of her nose. "You know what I mean." She pushed against his chest in a vain attempt to break his hold.

"No, I don't. And you are being presumptuous."

"Yes, you do," he countered. "And perhaps I am."

"You—" She wrinkled her nose, having lost the thread of the conversation.

He chuckled at her expression.

"Forget it. Listen, I'm having an end-of-class, Indian summer pool party at my house on Saturday. Here's the address." He tore off a scrap of the paper Stan had given him, scribbling quickly on it.

"You're invited to come— two o'clock. But *no interview*." He tapped her nose

to emphasize the point. "Should I expect you?"

She looked down at the scrap of paper in her hand. She had heard vague stories about his house, something about it being very weird and very private. He was giving her the opportunity to view it. Perhaps she could change his mind about the interview, and if not, she could always write about his house. And who knew who else might be there at the party suitable for an interview?

Besides, she wanted to see him again. He was too fascinating not to want to see again. Of course she would come.

"I'll be there. Thank you Tyber; I look forward to it, but I'm not promising that I won't try to change your mind."

“Why would you want to change a perfectly good set of beliefs, Zanita?” His dry tone mocked her.

“On the interview only,” she clarified.

“Whatever you think. Goodnight, Curls; see you Saturday.”

Zanita never suspected that she had just been masterfully lured into playing the shell game.

END OF EXCERPT

Gotta love a man with a little bwains and a little talent ;) Ha! To have more fun with Tyber and the gang go here:

<http://www.amazon.com/dp/B006IYFGN>

You might even find a special New Year's Event there!