



Save The Best For Last

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Something Real

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Man of Her Heart

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Dear Reader,

I hope you will enjoy this sampler (nearly 14,000 words worth) of three related stories about three New Yorkers, friends since their early teenage years, who, over a several-year period, each find their soul mates.

Although all three of these books, **Save The Best For Last**, **Something Real**, and **Man of Her Heart**, are available separately at online retailers Amazon and Barnes & Noble, as well as at my [eStore](#), the bundle that includes all three (at a price less than purchasing separately) is available *only* at my [eStore](#).

Enjoy!

## **Save The Best For Last**

THE LAW AND THE LADY...

Graphic artist Genevieve L'Esperance has got it all together, even by tough New York

standards: A thriving career, a spacious Upper East Side condo, even a sort-of boyfriend named Barry. But the one thing she doesn't have is something Americans take for granted...and if she's found out it'll mean the end of life as she knows it. And now the law is closing in on her...

## THE LADY AND THE LAWYER...

Gen's friend Barry comes up with a solution and quickly moves her to a rented room uptown while he finalizes arrangements to keep her safe. While Gen is grateful to him, she can't help feeling that she's sold out her future. But then Barry's master plan gets delayed, and when she meets Dexter Gray, the struggling law student who occupies the other room on the floor, things really start to get complicated...

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## Something Real

Francesca Perry has a deep-rooted dislike of policemen, so when one of her friends introduces her to one of New York's finest during a chance traffic encounter, she can barely disguise her hostility. But a freak accident soon has her at his mercy, and the gentle manner with which he treats her has her resolve beginning to thaw. Yes, her family has suffered indignities and a devastating loss at the hands of law enforcement... but are all men in blue bad guys? Suddenly she's not so sure...

Officer Terrence Gulliver takes one look at the slim, curly-haired woman and is instantly captivated. He considers himself lucky that he knows her companion and can score an introduction, but Francesca's—"Cesca" to her friends—barely concealed antagonism tells him he has no advantage. When Cesca is knocked unconscious, he moves to do what he does best...protect and serve. He promptly carries her to his patrol car to get her urgently needed medical attention...and as he holds her in his arms he resolves to charm her into changing her mind...for in her he senses something potentially different...something real.

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## Man of Her Heart

Olivia de Vries's world is shattered when she learns that her husband, Reese, has been cheating on her. She promptly files for divorce and goes into seclusion with her infant son at her Manhattan apartment while she tries to adjust...and tries not to think about the man who, in spite of her having married Reese, has always held her heart...

Brian Price never stopped loving Liv, even after she left him four years before to take a job in Chicago. He was brokenhearted when she married another man, but even after she bore her husband a son, he couldn't forget her. When he learns her marriage is over and that she and the baby are alone on Christmas Day, he rushes to New York to be with her. While much has changed, his feelings for her haven't. He's determined to make her his

again by Valentine's Day...this time for keeps.

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## Save The Best For Last

### EXCERPT

Strains of the instrumental jazz CD playing in the Smith's boom box below made their way through the glass of the window. Genevieve couldn't smell the meat cooking, but she'd glimpsed the thick steaks on the grill, and the thought was sufficient to make her want to eat something herself. She decided to walk over to one of the neighborhood restaurants and order some take-out. Surely no one would be looking for her on a Friday night. Getting out into the pulse of the neighborhood might even do her good, maybe help her conquer her illogical fears. Barry was right about one thing. She shouldn't be alone. She needed to be around people, even if she wasn't actually with anyone.

Genevieve grabbed her hairbrush and opened her bedroom door to go freshen up. She'd barely closed the door behind her when Dexter rushed out of his room on the opposite side of the hall, coming to a dead halt when it appeared they both had the same destination.

"Hi," she said, clearly glad to see her neighbor. She didn't see him often, but when she did it was always fun. The awkwardness of their first encounter had been quickly forgotten as they formed a neighborly friendship. He had a quick wit, and always shared amusing anecdotes about his work in the medical examiner's office. Unfortunately, he was usually in a hurry to get somewhere, so their encounters were as brief as they were enjoyable.

"Hi there. Uh...are we both headed for the same place?"

"I think so. But I'm not in a hurry, so you go ahead."

"Neither was I. For a change," he added with a smile. "I've got the night off from the lab."

I was just going to take a quick shower before heading out to get some dinner."

"That's a coincidence. I was going to pick up something to eat myself."

"Oh." He hesitated for a moment. "Well, if you don't have any other plans, I'd love some company," he suggested.

Genevieve visibly brightened at the prospect of having a dinner companion. "I'd love to join you." Then she glanced down at her neat but casual attire. "Do I need to change?"

"Nah. You look fine. I wasn't going anywhere fancy. I'm only getting cleaned up because of, you know, where I work."

Genevieve inadvertently wrinkled her nose. She'd forgotten Dexter spent his days around dead bodies.

"I'll be with you in about ten minutes."

"Okay. You're sure I'm all right as I am?" She wore the tan Capris and sleeveless V-neck tan ribbed sweater she'd put on after her morning shower.

He lazily surveyed her body, and as his lips eased into a smile Genevieve suddenly began to feel self-conscious...as if she was standing before him nude. She knew she should excuse herself, but she felt rooted to the spot by some invisible force.

"I'll say you are," he finally said. Then he winked. "See you in a few."

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By the time Dexter vacated the bathroom a few minutes later, Genevieve had brushed her hair in her room and styled it in a French braid down the back of her head, securing the end with a coated rubber band. When it was her turn to use the bathroom she brushed her teeth and applied lipstick and blusher, and as she emerged the fully dressed Dexter simultaneously stepped out of his room.

He wore a long-sleeved collarless white shirt in a light textured cotton, starched, faded jeans, and t-strap brown sandals, looking casual and crisp at the same time. "Ready?" he asked.

"Yes. Just let me get my purse."

She preceded him down the narrow inside stairs. "Where are we going, anyway?" she asked when they reached the street.

"Have you ever been to the Caribbean place around the corner?"

"I've gotten take-out from them. Good food." She'd found the tropical atmosphere appealing as well and would have eaten there, but was reluctant to do so alone. When

she dined with Barry it was usually at a downtown location near the network's offices. His living in Brooklyn made coming to Harlem inconvenient.

"Oh, it's great. And a lot cheaper than flying to Jamaica," he said with a chuckle.

The center of the restaurant consisted of long communal tables with chairs on both sides, with smaller rectangular tables for four along the walls. The host greeted Dexter by name and showed them to one of the latter. The waitress who quickly appeared with menus knew his name as well. "You must be a regular," Genevieve remarked when some female patrons seated in the center perimeter waved to him.

"Yeah, I'm here most weeks. Sometimes I just get take-out, and sometimes just dessert. They've got a rum cake that's out of this world."

"Dexter! No wonder you're not sitting with us tonight. You've got a lady friend with you," cooed a pretty brown-skinned woman who appeared to be in her mid thirties. "You must introduce me."

"Chiara, this is Genevieve," he said with perfect pronunciation a long way from his initial question of 'Jon who?' "Gen, this is Chiara, who eats here about as often as I do."

"Nice to meet you, Genevieve," Chiara replied.

Genevieve was pleased by the way Chiara aced her name. "Likewise."

"You must be a very special lady," Chiara continued. "We've all been coming here for ages, and Dexter's never once brought a date."

Genevieve's eyes darted to Dexter, unsure if he wanted her to spill the beans. The slight shake of his head told her he wanted to continue the charade, so she flashed the questioning woman a sunny smile. "Well, I think he's pretty special, too."

"Y'all gonna stay for the music?"

"Of course," Dexter replied.

Genevieve casually opened her menu after Chiara moved on. "You're a popular fellow," she remarked.

"Usually I sit at the big tables in the middle. When you sit with strangers they're not strangers very long. And as I said, I come here pretty regularly. It's my treat to myself after a long, hard week."

"Do you think you'll get in school for the fall semester?"

He shook his head. "It's not looking good, but I'm still trying."

"I'm so sorry, Dexter." She truly was.

"It's all right," he said with a shrug. Then he grinned at her. "I'm not worried about it, and certainly not now. Not when I have such a beautiful dinner companion."

A warmth spread over Genevieve's cheeks "Well, thank you."



They had finished their coconut shrimp appetizer and were awaiting the arrival of their entrees when a band set up and began to play reggae music. Genevieve sat back in her chair and enjoyed the music. Before her father's disappearance, the sound of reggae would have made her homesick.

A wave of sadness spread over her like a raincloud, threatening to overpower her cheerful mood. She struggled to reclaim it as their plates were delivered.

"How's your chicken?" Dexter asked after she'd had taken her first bite of the jerk chicken they'd both ordered.

"Wonderful." Even as she ate, Genevieve inadvertently swayed her upper body to the infectious beat of the music. The same sounds that had brought on melancholy just moments before now perked up her spirits. Aside from funeral marches, most music was meant to cheer.

"You look happy," Dexter observed.

"I'm enjoying this," she admitted. "I'm so glad I ran into you." "You don't know many people in New York, do you, Gen?"

"No, not really. Neither of the girls I kept in touch with after graduation still live here. I do have a friend who lives in Brooklyn, but we usually meet in midtown because it's centrally located." This fun place, full of chatter and laughter and music, seemed very distant from the rather staid restaurants Barry brought her to.

It was probably just as well, because her reaction to her handsome floor-mate was very different from the one she had with Barry. The spark of attraction that was nowhere to be found when she looked at Barry was very much in evidence with Dexter, reinforcing for her that becoming Mrs. Barry Henderson would be a terrible mistake.



Twenty minutes later Genevieve placed her cloth napkin on the table when their waitress asked if she could bring them dessert. "None for me, thanks. I'm stuffed."

"How about some rum cake?" Dexter suggested, nodding to the waitress to bring him an

order.

"Oh, I can't. But I will have another rum punch." Her eyes sparkled with exhilaration. She'd already had two. Still, she didn't expect Dexter's next words.

"Let's dance."

"Oh! I don't think so, Dexter. I'm more of a chair dancer. Besides, the song's half over."

"There'll be another one after it," he said, the outer corners of his mouth turning upward in amusement. "C'mon, Gen." He stood and took her hand.

Laughing, Genevieve allowed him to lead her to the open space directly in front of the band. Five or six couples were already dancing. She closed her eyes and swayed her hips to the beat, her feet barely moving. Reggae was so relaxing to dance to. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so stress-free. Of course, those two rum punches probably had a lot to do with the free and easy way she felt. She rolled her head from side to side on the axis of her neck, her arms held high and outstretched, with lots of hip motion. Eventually she did open her eyes, and while she expected to see Dexter opposite her, the smoldering flame in his eyes as he watched her movements came as a surprise. She felt a rush of heat course through her body as her breathing became ragged. She recognized the rush of attraction, and she welcomed it. It had been far too long since she'd felt this way. She closed her eyes as she continued to rotate her hips, her feet barely moving, in a dance just for him.

The song ended way too soon, disappointing her, but the band quickly blended into one of her favorites, the Peter Frampton classic, *Baby I Love Your Way*. When Dexter pulled her close she merely closed her eyes and breathed in his clean, male scent. How long had it been since she'd danced? And how long had it been since she'd been held in a man's arms? A man whom she found devilishly sexy?

Dexter didn't hold her too closely, but his thigh with its hard muscles did brush against hers repeatedly, and his large palm felt warm against her back. How appropriate that the band played this song, Genevieve thought. Dexter really did have a nice way about him, plus he was so handsome. His chest was directly in her line of vision, the top buttons of his tailored shirt undone to reveal a minimum of skin. She found herself wishing she could see more.

One thing she felt sure of. Whoever landed Dexter was going to be a lucky woman.

"I'm glad you came with me tonight, Gen," he said, his lips just inches from her ear.

"So am I," she replied dreamily.



They left the restaurant after Genevieve finished her drink and he finished his cake. She split the sizeable tab with him – they were, after all, neighbors who had shared a hearty meal that included appetizers, drinks, and dessert, not a couple out on a date. Besides, Dexter needed to apply all available funds to his tuition.

She remembered something Chiara had said and suddenly became curious about it. “So Dexter, why haven’t you ever brought a date to the restaurant?” she asked when they stepped outside onto the still-lively street.

“Because I can’t afford to,” he replied without hesitation. “I’ve got to get my tuition squared away first.” He looked at her curiously. “But if I were in a position to date, you’d be the one I’d ask out.”

“I’m flattered. Thank you.” She gasped as cold raindrops began to stab at her skin. “Oh, my. Where’d this come from?”

“It’s too dark to see any changes in the sky.” He grabbed her hand. “C’mon, let’s make a run for it.”

Still holding hands, they ran the half block to the brownstone, getting to the top of the stairs and safely beneath an overhang just before the sky opened up and the rain came down in sheets. Dexter released her hand, and for a minute or so they simply stood outside, watching the downpour as they struggled to catch their breath. Genevieve knew most of her breathlessness came from running, but part of it came from the heady sensation of his fingers that until just a minute ago had been intertwined with hers.

Dexter unlocked the large oak door. The double parlor doors leading to the Smith’s quarters were closed when they stepped inside the foyer. Genevieve shivered in the air conditioning, which felt frigid to her torso and bare arms, both wet from raindrops.

“Here, let me dry you off.” Dexter stood behind her and rubbed both his palms and his sleeve-covered arms—the cotton fabric puckered by raindrops—up and down the length of her bare ones, both drying and warming her skin in an action that made her long to turn and throw her arms around him.

Instead she said in an even voice that belied her arousal, “Oh, that’s much better. Thanks.” She headed for the elegant maple staircase. “I must tell you, Dexter,” she said as she slowly climbed, “tonight was a lot more fun than my bringing a sandwich back to my room.” She paused mid-flight to turn and flash a smile his way. “Uh...you do realize that I’m the envy of Chiara and her friends.”

“Oh, I saw some men who clearly looked like they’d be happy to change places with me as well.”

Genevieve knew her slow steps resulted from a combination of the three rum punches she’d consumed and fatigue from running to dodge the raindrops. She turned to Dexter

when they reached the landing, standing just outside her bedroom door. "I guess you'll be catching up on your rest tomorrow and Sunday," she said, a touch wistfully at the thought of not seeing him.

"Actually, I'm due at the lab first thing in the morning. I'll probably come home tomorrow afternoon and sleep straight through till Monday morning," he said with a laugh.

"Well, you take care of yourself, Dexter. Good night."

"Good night, Gen." Before she could turn away to unlock her door he leaned over and planted a quick kiss squarely on her mouth. As he straightened she saw the surprise flash in his eyes, as if he'd just realized how inappropriate his action had been. "Um...I don't know what possessed me to do that." He shrugged. "I know this wasn't a date, but I guess I just did what I usually do when I see a pretty girl to her door."

The kiss had caught Genevieve by surprise, but she shocked herself with her verbal response to it. "All I can say is, if a man kissed me like that when he brought me home, I'd think he didn't want to see me again."

Dexter took a moment to absorb her words, and his eyes brightened in amusement. "That's a misconception that warrants correction."

She stared up at him, her heart pounding in an erratic rhythm as he stepped closer and wrapped his arms around her. For a long moment they just gazed each other, then his lips slowly descended to meet hers.

Genevieve's eyelids fluttered shut. She drank in the sweetness of his kiss, welcomed his searching tongue into her mouth, and savored the feel of his strong hands, one at the base of her neck and the other bracing her lower back, his fingers spread and clutching at her skin. She'd come out and dared him to kiss her, and he was clearly up to the challenge. Her eager hands reached up to frame the sides of his face, his unshaven chin tickling her palms, the dark curls of the hair on his head soft beneath her fingertips. The pleasure she felt radiated downward, settling between her thighs.

When he broke the kiss—well before she was ready—her body was left tingling all over.

"What message did that send?" he whispered, still holding her, his breath hot against her neck.

"That was definitely a kiss that says you'll be calling," she said breathlessly. She hastened to add, "If this had been a date."

"Good. I can't leave you thinking otherwise. Sweet dreams, Gen." He released her and walked toward his door.



Inside her room, Genevieve absently creamed her cheeks and slipped into a lace-trimmed cotton nightgown after turning on the air conditioner. As she sank onto her bed she was still conscious of the lingering aura surrounding her. She pressed her lips together in an attempt to recreate the feel of Dexter's kiss. A wonderful shiver of wanting ran through her in the not-yet-cool room. She didn't know what had gotten into her, practically issuing an invitation for Dexter to kiss her. She'd been perfectly content to bid him goodnight and retire to her room. But then he gave her that quick kiss, and she wanted more. It must have been the rum talking...or maybe the rum had made her more aware of the fact that she found Dexter extraordinarily enticing. That kiss had awakened something in her, something she feared might have died because Barry had been unable to bring it out.

And she knew she wouldn't be able to simply put that feeling away in some dark space like clean, dry dishes.

As she drifted off to sleep, she remembered her mother's words to her of half a lifetime ago, about how the man she chose to marry would make her laugh and would leave her dizzy and breathless. Barry's kisses could never make her feel this alive. Once again she knew she'd made the right decision. Marriage to Barry was akin to robbing herself of the passion every woman deserved to feel for the man in her life.

But she still had to figure out how to stay in the United States.



## **Something Real**

EXCERPT

**“Who’s there?”**

A deep voice replied, “NYPD.”

Cesca's heart stilled as she saw a blue uniform through the peephole of Gen's apartment. She was practically hyperventilating when she opened the door. What did the police want with her? Had one of Gen's neighbors seen her going inside and reported a stranger letting herself into an owner's unit? Well, she had a perfect right to be here.

But how would she prove it?

The rapping at the door sounded a second time. “Will you open the door, please?”

Cesca's palms had become so damp she had to use the hem of her dress as a shield to open the door. How could she prove she was here at the owner's request?

Her mouth dropped open when she recognized the officer standing in the hall. "Terrence. What're you doing here?"

"Hello, Cesca. Didn't Gen tell you? She asked me to come by and make sure everything was okay at her place while she was gone."

"She asked you...?" Cesca's forehead wrinkled. "I don't get it. It's been six or seven weeks since I hurt my head. When did she ask you to do this? And how did you get past the doorman?"

"Um...Actually, she mentioned the trip she and her husband were taking that night at the hospital and asked if I'd stop by." Terrence grinned. "I wrote down the dates. Then she said you'd be spending time here, likely on weekday evenings. So I guess I'm here to check on both you and the apartment. As for how I got into the building, I'd like to say it was my charm, but it was most likely my uniform." He winked.

Her breath caught in her throat at the unexpected action. He did cut a dashing figure in dark blue, she had to admit. She found it more and more difficult to be annoyed, and finally her lips curled into a smile. "It looks like my dear friend Gen is up to her usual mischief." No wonder Gen had asked her to feed their tropical fish—Dexter had named them Moby, Jaws, and Company—instead of asking Z.L. to do it, and at the specific time of six o'clock. She wanted to tell Terrence what time he could find her.

"It's been a long time, Cesca. You're looking well. How've you been?"

She swallowed hard. He made the simple compliment and question sound so sexy. "I'm good, thanks. Thank you for coming by to check on me, Terrence. It was very sweet. But as you can see, all is well. I fed the fish, and I was just about to leave."

"How are you going to get home?"

Cesca rubbed her lips together. She realized too late that she'd opened the door for an invitation from him to take her home. He really was a nice man, and he was certainly easy on the eyes, with that beefy build and those bedroom eyes. She couldn't help wondering what he looked like shirtless, and how it would feel to run her palms over that expansive chest. If he had any other profession, she'd probably make an effort to find out.

"I was going to walk," she said. "I live fairly close to here. Plus, I was going to stop and get some take-out."

"I was just about to go get some dinner myself," Terrence said. "Why don't we do it together? It's always nicer to eat with someone than alone, don't you think?"

Cesca quickly realized there was no gracious way out, and besides, what harm would it do? Terrence seemed like a nice enough man. If he weren't a policeman she would definitely go out with him. But since he was a law enforcement officer—a good thing

when it came to keeping law and order for the city at large, but in too many cases a bad thing for people like herself—she would simply have this one dinner with him and then not see him after that. Terrence had been right about one thing; it would be more pleasant to have dinner in someone's company than alone...especially on a Saturday night.

But to dine with a uniformed police officer? It would make her uncomfortable, to say nothing of the disloyalty it raised in her. "Um...do you have a change of clothes?"

"Not with me, no." Apparently sensing her discomfort, he said, "Does the uniform really make you that uncomfortable?"

"I feel a little like I should be under arrest," she remarked with a trace of amusement that surprised her; she didn't think she would ever be able to joke about anything police-related.

"Look at it this way. This uniform means you'll be completely safe with me."

She smiled shyly. "I guess you've got a point there. All right."

His relieved grin told her he half expected her to decline his invitation.

"I'll just get my purse."

He waited while she disappeared inside, and when she returned she stepped into the hall and turned to latch the door. "Well," she said brightly as she faced him, "where should we go?"

"I'm perfectly willing to let you make the choice. There are very few foods I don't like."

Cesca tried to think of someplace informal, where Terrence's uniform wouldn't be a hindrance. "How about some ribs? There's a place over on Second at Seventy-Seventh that's not bad."

"Jimmy's?"

"Yes." She quickly got over her surprise that he knew of it, realizing that he covered the Upper East Side in his work.

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After making their selections and handing the menus back to the waiter, Terrence smiled at her across the table in that special way a man does when he's interested in a woman. "So tell me all about yourself, Francesca Perry," he said. "I want to know everything: Where you were born, the name of your kindergarten teacher, the name of your first crush."

"My first crush?"

"Yes. And I don't mind telling you that I hate him already."

They shared a laugh. "Well," she began, "I'm twenty-eight, and I've lived my entire life here in Manhattan. I'm my parents' only daughter. I graduated from Howard University. I conduct efficiency workshops and seminars all over the Northeast. And my kindergarten teacher was named Mrs. Pearlman."

"You forgot to mention your first crush."

She chuckled. "His name was Anthony Ray, and it was in the second grade. My goodness, I haven't thought about him in years. His family moved to New Jersey when we were in fourth grade, and I never saw him again."

"Ah, but you never forget. I still remember Leslie Haines from first grade. Charlie Brown had his little red-haired girl, and I had mine."

Cesca raised a curious eyebrow. "Was she white?" She had no problem with that. Anthony, whom she remembered as being really cute, had been white. In her neighborhood, that was all there was.

"No, but she had reddish-brown hair that she wore in braids."

"What happened to her?"

"She's still around. Married, with a couple of kids. And the one time I did ask her out—after we were adults—she refused. Apparently, she'd already met the guy she eventually married." He placed his hand over his heart. "My heart was broken. I'd waited over twenty-five years to tell her how I felt." Then he grinned. "And it's been at least six weeks since the first time I saw you. So I'm getting a little faster on the uptake."

They both laughed.

"You said you're the only girl in your family," he noted. "How many brothers do you have?"

The moment the words were out, Terrence saw a flash of pain in her dark eyes. He feared he may have opened a land mine. He mentally braced himself to learn that he'd just committed a faux pas.

She dropped her gaze momentarily and appeared to swallow before saying, "I had one younger brother. He...he died in May."

Terrence's mouth fell open. Damn. He certainly wasn't expecting to hear her say that. He'd just trampled on an open emotional wound, and he would give anything if he could take the question back.

But of course he couldn't. "Cesca," he said, shaking his head helplessly. "I don't know what to say. The last thing I wanted to do was reopen a healing wound."

She nodded. "It's all right, Terrence. You couldn't possibly have known. Besides, all of us have to get accustomed to the idea that he's gone." She drew in a deep breath. "And now that that's said, I hope you won't mind if we change the subject."

"No, of course not." Terrence was only too glad to comply. "Why don't I tell you a little about myself?" At her nod and slight smile he continued. "I'm from Hollis, Queens. I'm thirty-one, and I always wanted to be a police officer." He chuckled. "I guess I watched too many cop shows when I was a kid. I always wanted to be one of the good guys."

Cesca smiled at him. Then she noticed his demeanor changed from joking to more serious.

"Seriously, though, I still remember how the crack epidemic hit my neighborhood hard. I was just a kid at the time, but it really tore up the community. The murder rate skyrocketed, and so did break-ins and thefts. It was barely safe to go outside anymore." He shook his head sadly. "A lot of mothers cried over their children who got hooked on it."

"It sounds awful. I, um, missed a lot of that urban experience. When I was little, the biggest thing happening in my neighborhood was the preppy murder case....and I'm too young to remember the coverage." The strangling of a recent high school graduate after rough sex in Central Park attracted a nationwide audience and showed the seamy side of life lived by privileged youth of the Upper East Side. "I'm sure you're very good at your chosen profession," she said, wanting to acknowledge his reasons for going into law enforcement.

He grinned. "I take that as a compliment. And since you don't like policemen, I can appreciate how that must be a little difficult for you to say."

She nodded agreement. She still could hardly believe she was sitting in a restaurant across from a uniformed police officer.

Their food was delivered. Cesca had ordered the barbecued chicken platter, and Terrence the ribs. Cesca noted that her fries were a lot hotter and crisper than they'd been the last time she'd eaten here and wondered if Terrence's uniform had anything to do with the staff being on their toes.

Throughout the meal they made small talk and learned a little more about each other. "That was good," she said. Even though she'd used utensils to eat, she wiped her fingers with a moistened napkin. "This was fun, Terrence. I really had a nice time. I'm glad you suggested we have dinner together."

The waiter discreetly placed a check on the table. Cesca reached for it, but Terrence was faster. "Oh, no you don't. This is on me. I invited you, remember?"

"You made a suggestion that we eat together," she protested. "That's not the same as an

invitation, and you have no obligation to pay. Why don't we split the tab fifty-fifty?"

"Nothing doing." He briefly perused the bill, then removed several bills from his wallet and slipped them in the crease of the check holder.

"It's not like we're on a date or anything," Cesca reminded him.

"Indulge me. I'd kind of like to think we are. So tell me...If this was a real date, would you want to see me again?"

"That isn't fair, Terrence."

He shrugged easily. "It seems like a pretty basic question to me. What's not fair about it?"

"Because you know how I feel about law enforcement officers in general."

Terrence nodded. "So you can accept me as a man, but not as a police officer. Is that it?"

His words sent a chill through her, for she absolutely could accept him as a man. What was more, she found herself repeating thinking about how wonderful it would feel to have those muscular arms hold her tightly, to feel those hands on her body...She sighed, knowing she had to answer his question. "The way you say it makes it sound so silly."

He leaned in close, and her eyes focused on his mouth as he said, "Precisely the point I was trying to make."

She closed her eyes, partly to get the picture of those sensuous lips out of her head.

But she couldn't turn off her hearing, and his gentle voice floated to her ears. "I'm not trying to make you feel foolish, Cesca. I'm just trying to make you see how silly your thinking is, and I hope I can help you separate who I am from what I do."

She considered this.

"Tell you what. Why don't you tell me why you feel the way you do about policemen."

Cesca's brow wrinkled. "Isn't it a little late to get into that conversation? I mean, dinner's over."

"Aha," he said knowingly. "Dinner is over, but the evening isn't. Do you expect the two of us to walk out the door and go our separate ways?"

Cesca lowered her chin to her chest and stared at him suspiciously. "And what were you expecting to happen?"

"I expect to take you home and see you safely to your door."

She shook her head. "Out of the question."

"Cesca, it wouldn't be right for me to leave you to your own devices to get home. In case you haven't noticed, I'm a gentleman."

"I appreciate your concern, Terrence, but I've lived in the city all my life. I really don't need an escort. In fact, when I get home, I'll be walking my dog."

"Cesca, I'm a public servant. And tonight, my service to the city is to see that you get home safely. I really hope you won't argue with me on this one."

She decided it would be pointless. After the waiter brought Terrence's change, he left a tip and stood, guiding her by the elbow out the front door.

They strolled leisurely to Eighty-Fourth Street, where they turned west. They walked in chatty companionship across several lengthy crosstown blocks until they reached a quiet block of brick townhouses. Terrence knew this area was somewhat removed from the prime Manhattan real estate of the East Sixties and Seventies, but it certainly wasn't cheap these days; even past Ninety-Ninth Street residential properties were priced at more than a thousand dollars per square foot. Francesca Perry was growing more intriguing by the moment. How was it that she, a seminar conductor, happened to live in such a wealthy neighborhood?

"This is it," she said, coming to a halt in front of a redbrick house with that rarity among private homes in Manhattan, a garage.

"Nice digs," he remarked. "I see your car has its own room."

"It makes parking a breeze. The house actually belongs to my parents. I lived in Atlanta after college, and I had just taken my current job up here at around the same time they moved down to Charlotte, North Carolina. It made sense for me to move back in here. At first they didn't want to sell in case things didn't work out, and then the bottom fell out of the real estate market, and if they sold they wouldn't get as much as they should for it."

That explained the North Carolina plates on her car, he thought. She'd probably purchased the car down there for a lot less than what she would have paid in New York.

"How long have they lived down there?"

"Three or four years. My father's a partner in a private investment firm there, and my mother is a juvenile court judge. When they lived here my father worked on Wall Street. They moved to North Carolina a few years back. I was in Atlanta at the time, and I decided to come back to New York. They weren't ready to sell the house just yet. For one, my mother planned on presiding over an occasional case, and my father also had business in the city. So I moved back here and lived in the house. It was a win-win situation."

"So your mother is just semi-retired."

"I guess you can say that. They, uh, left town rather abruptly, after my father had an

incident with the police.”

Terrence’s eyebrows jutted upward in surprise. “It must have been pretty bad, if it prompted him to leave town,” he said tentatively.

“I hope you won’t mind if I say I’d rather not talk about it.”

“Of course not.” He just hoped that one day she would want to tell him.

“Well, I guess I’d better go in.” Cesca turned to him, smiling.

He knew she expected him to say goodnight to her here, but he didn’t like that idea. It simply wasn’t safe to share a goodnight kiss in front of an entrance just a few steps above street level; anyone could sneak up on them with the intention of robbery. So what if that scenario was unlikely, what with him being in uniform. He still didn’t want to do it, and he acknowledged the real reason.

He intended to kiss her, and he wanted to do it in private.

“Go ahead and unlock the door,” he instructed. At her surprised expression he added, “Don’t worry. I won’t venture beyond just inside. But I don’t want to say goodnight to you out here.”

With shaking hands, Cesca inserted the key in the lock. Her feminine instincts knew precisely why he wanted to say goodnight to her inside. It took three tries to find the keyhole...

As Cesca unlocked the door, Terrence heard the dog she’d mentioned barking inside. An alarm system immediately began a loud hum of warning from the moment she pushed the door in. “Come in quickly,” she said. “After thirty seconds, this thing starts blaring loud enough to wake the dead.”

He stepped inside and swiftly closed the door behind them. Cesca entered the digital code on the keypad, silencing it. A model-perfect Dalmatian now hovered around Cesca’s legs, his bark replaced by a whining sound. Terrence stared at the dog, clearly one of the prettiest of the species. “He’s beautiful,” he said. “Or is it a she?”

Cesca bent over to address the dog. “Hi, baby,” she cooed. “Cesca’s home now. I’m gonna take you out in just a few minutes.” She gave the dog’s head an affectionate rub, then straightened up. “You were right, it’s a he.”

“What’s his name?”

“Spot.”

Terrence couldn’t keep his voice from wavering with laughter. “Spot? Is that really the best name you could come up with for this beautiful animal?”

Cesca looked at him and shrugged. "I guess it isn't very original, but it was the first thing that came to my mind, because of his...well, you know."

"It's incredibly unimaginative, like naming a German Shepherd 'Shep.'" Terrence's hands found their way into his pockets. "You said you were taking Spot for a walk. I have to go over to Lexington to get the subway. Why don't you come with me at least part of the way? I'd feel better. It's dark out, and little Spot here doesn't look like he'd be much protection in case someone should...threaten you in any way." Somehow he'd expected her to have a larger dog. No doubt Spot's best function was barking from behind the doors of the townhouse, making his presence known, but keeping his petite size a secret from whoever was outside.

"Actually, since I did all that walking, I'll probably just bring him out back and let him do his business."

Terrence frowned, but quickly understood. People like Cesca who lived in private homes had small backyards. She'd probably be safe walking her dog on this quiet block, but it was all but assured if she was in her own backyard.

Spot scampered toward the rear of the house, and Cesca gave him a shy smile, her hands folded demurely in front of her body. "I want you to know, Terrence, that I had a lovely evening."

"A lovely evening spent with anyone, or lovely evening spent with a law enforcement officer?" He didn't give her the chance to reply. Instead he pulled her into his arms, noting that she didn't resist. He gazed into her beautiful face. "I wanted tonight to go on and on and never come to an end. But now that it's over, I have to say that I've been looking forward to this part as well." His arms tightened around her shoulders as his face slowly descended toward hers. She raised her chin, and her eyelids fluttered shut just seconds before he touched his lips to hers.

They nibbled at each other in a slow, sensuous manner. Terrence rotated his palms in small circles over her shoulders. He wanted to pull her closer, to allow his hands to freely roam up and down the length and width of her back, wanted to bend his knees and push her buttocks in toward his erection so she could feel firsthand the effect she had on him, but he did none of those things. Instead he enjoyed the feel of her soft breasts pressing into his chest. He explored her mouth in a way that let it be known just what he wanted from her. But he was careful to keep the extent of his desire for her in check; kissing her with the intense hunger she brought out in him would only put her off. After all, they barely knew each other...and she was clearly uncomfortable with his uniform.

They were both out of breath when they broke apart. "Yes," he said, "as much as I enjoyed earlier, this was the best part of the evening." He smiled at her. "I'm going to say goodnight now, Cesca, but know this: You haven't heard the last of me, because this policeman has every intention of pursuing you and getting you to change your mind about

me. Goodnight." He slipped out the front door, closing it behind him.

Cesca collapsed against the wall, her chest rising and falling with each breath she took. Terrence was gone, but he had no intention of leaving her life. He sounded so determined when he said he was going to get her to change her mind about not dating police officers.

The funny part was that when he took her in his arms and kissed her, she'd met his passion with her own, to the degree where, for those few moments at least, she'd totally forgotten about his profession.



## **Man of Her Heart**

### EXCERPT

Liv shut the oven door after sliding the baking dish back in the oven, then put the baster she'd just used in the spoon rest. She didn't know why she'd roasted two Cornish hens; she wouldn't be able to finish even one. But the market she went to sold them in pairs, so she'd prepared both. At least she wouldn't have to cook for a few days. She loved chicken in all formats...roasted, fried, baked Italian style, and wings.

She turned to Christian, surveying her from his walker. "Your mommy did a nice job. Aren't those hens beautiful?"

She bent to kiss him as he squealed a response. "I love you, you know that?"

The sound of the house phone startled her. She wasn't expecting anyone. She sure hoped her family hadn't driven down from the Bronx to surprise her, not after she'd said she preferred to be alone.

Picking up the phone, she greeted the concierge with a cheery, "Merry Christmas!"

"Thank you, Mrs. de Vries, and the same to you," he replied in his usual crisp tone. "You have a visitor. A Mr. Brian Price is asking to see you."

Liv withdrew her breath. Brian was here? Her mouth fell open, and she found she was unable to speak.

"Uh...Mrs. de Vries? Are you there?"

"Yes, I'm here. Um...send him up, please."

She hung up the phone, feeling dazed. Then she realized this had been Sinclair's doing. Doggone it, she'd promised not to say anything. But what was done was done, so she swung into action.

She knelt in front of Christian's walker. "It looks like we're going to have some company. An old friend of mine has come to see us. I want you to be a good boy when I introduce you to him. And now, Mommy has to go make herself pretty. Come on." She led the way down the hall toward her bedroom. If she had time she would change. About the best thing she could say about her attire of white sweatshirt and charcoal gray sweatpants was that she looked presentable, but at least not sloppy. She wore no makeup, and her hair had been brushed into its usual ponytail. Liv fingered her smooth roots, thankful she'd gone to Jasmine's last week for a touch-up. Deciding the pony tail made her look too young, she swept it into a knot and pinned it in place. She turned her head from side to side as she checked the style from both angles, then looked at Christian, who had wheeled down the hall after her. "Be honest. How do I look?" His bewildered expression made her laugh. Her son, a few weeks shy of his first birthday, was quite expressive and had a way with making faces.

The sound of the doorbell reverberated through the apartment. "All right," she said to Christian. "It's showtime. Now, you remember what I told you. This is Brian's first time seeing you. Make a good impression." She nodded, and he did the same.

She walked toward the door, Christian rolling at her heels. She opened it and tried not to gasp at the sight of Brian. He stood there, looking handsome as ever in jeans, round-toed boots the color of butterscotch, the wool camel overcoat she remembered, and a cream-colored, fringed scarf draped around his neck. He'd abandoned the clean-shaven look she remembered and now sported a thick mustache and neatly trimmed beard, giving him a rakish, almost dangerous look. His head was bare, and his gloved hands held a plastic bag from a chain drugstore. His brown eyes were fastened to her face as if he could see clear through to her bones. The intensity of his gaze made her feel a little lightheaded.

"Merry Christmas, Liv," he said.

"Merry Christmas, Brian. Come in."

When she stepped back, Christian rolled forward in his walker. Brian's handsome face broke out into a grin. "Hey there, li'l man!"

Liv couldn't help noting that Reese had the same nickname for Christian. "Brian, this is my son, Christian. He's eleven months old." She watched as Brian put down the bag, peeled off his gloves and then bent to pick Christian up. Liv held her breath as her son's tiny hand reached out to touch Brian's face, seemingly fascinated with his facial hair.

"Pow, pow," Brian teased. "You're a big boy, and I see your mommy in you."

"I think so, too," Liv said. Christian had an olive complexion halfway between Reese's

Caucasian skin tone and her own fair complexion. He had Reese's brown hair, but its coarse texture came from her, as did the round shape of his eyes.

Christian laughed and kicked as Brian lifted him out of his walker, then raised him high above his head.

"You like that, don't you," Brian said. "I'm gonna put you down now so I can take off my coat, but we'll do it again later, huh?" He lowered the baby back to the walker and carefully guided his legs into the openings on either side of the seat, then straightened up and unbuttoned his coat. As he tossed it into a wing chair in the foyer he said, "I, uh, guess you're wondering how I happened to show up on your doorstep on Christmas afternoon."

"It doesn't take a degree from M.I.T. to figure that out. I talked with Sinclair earlier. I thought it was safe to come clean with her about my marriage. I asked her not to say anything, but I see she didn't listen."

"Don't be upset with her, Liv. She knew I would want to know. I don't think she was expecting me to take action the way I did." Brian looked a little embarrassed. "I hope you don't think it was presumptive of me to be so certain you would see me when you didn't even want to be with your parents and sister." He shrugged. "I just...Something told me you wouldn't mind. I just couldn't bear the thought of you and Christian being alone on Christmas." Chuckling, he added, "But I admit that I had an anxious moment when the concierge called you. I held my breath until he told me your apartment number and directed me toward the elevator."

The picture of him anxiously awaiting her response in the lobby brought a smile to her lips. "At first I thought my family had driven down here, even though I told them we would be fine. They're all up at Jasmine's in the Bronx, so they're not that far from here."

"And when you found out it was me?" he prompted.

"I was...shocked. But I never considered not letting you in, not even for a second. As for your being presumptuous, I know you had good intentions. You did what you felt you needed to do. I appreciate that we've always...we've always had a special friendship." Of course, their relationship went much deeper than that, but she didn't want to mention that and hoped he wouldn't, either.

He smiled at her. "Yes, we have. You look beautiful, Liv."

Her body tingled. He'd just openly assessed her, from the impromptu bun on the top of her head to the red terry cloth booties on her feet, and he made her feel beautiful, as if she were wearing an evening gown rather than shapeless sweats...or a nightgown.

"Thanks. Let's go sit down." She looked down at Christian and gestured to him. "C'mon, Christian, we're going to sit and talk for a while."

The baby rolled with her to the spacious living room, with Brian behind them. She suspected his eyes were glued to her backside and tried to walk naturally.

"Nice place," he said, his eyes lingering on the breathtaking view and the seven-foot-tall decorated Christmas tree next to the white baby grand piano in the corner. "And something smells wonderful."

"Oh!" she said, suddenly remembering her hens. "I think my dinner's ready to come out." She turned toward the direction of the kitchen, then turned again to face Brian, suddenly feeling shy. "Would you...would you care to join us for dinner?"

"Sure. I'm just realizing I'm hungry."

"Good," she said, and meant it. If she had a choice to invite just one other person to spend Christmas with her and Christian, it would be Brian. Being with him had always felt so easy and natural. "Can you keep an eye on Christian for me while I get it ready? It should only take about ten minutes."

"Sure, go ahead."

In the kitchen, Liv saw that even the stuffing that spilled out of the hens was nicely browned. She removed the hens from the oven, steamed broccoli and heated a jar of chicken gravy. She welcomed the chance to be alone with her thoughts for a few minutes. Her head was spinning. Brian was here, in her living room, about to have dinner with her. She'd only spoken with Sinclair about two hours ago. Her friend must have told Brian about her divorce the moment they hung up...and Brian must have gotten in his car and headed for the city right away.

He'd literally dropped what he'd been doing to come to her.

That was pretty heady stuff. They hadn't even seen each other since that time at dinner over a year ago, when she'd been entering the unwieldy stage of her pregnancy. As long as she lived she would never forget the stunned look on his face when his eyes settled on her swollen midsection.

While the vegetables steamed and the gravy heated, Liv popped the cork on a bottle of Coppola Director's Cut Chardonnay. Brian was driving, but she figured one glass wouldn't hurt. She also planned on serving apple cider.

When she brought the glasses to the table, she glanced through the archway into the living room. It warmed her heart to see Brian standing at the window, holding Christian as he pointed out the various landmarks. "There's the Empire State Building...there's the Chrysler Building...there's the Queensboro Bridge..."

She moved her head back and took in a gulp of air. Brian, the man of her heart, was here. He'd wasted no time coming to her, and now he was coddling her son. What did it all mean? And...was she ready for it?

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As he held little Christian de Vries, Brian suddenly understood why his parents had been so thrilled to learn they were about to become grandparents. His exposure to infants had been minimal, but this brief time spent with this child made him wish he had a child of his own.

He sadly noted that if things had worked out differently, this could've been his and Liv's child. He still found it difficult to accept that she had chosen Reese de Vries over him. His mother, upon learning Liv had given birth to a son seven months after taking wedding vows, made the caustic comment that it looked like Liv selected the wealthiest man she could find to trap into marriage, but Brian knew she was no gold digger. She'd left him because Chicago offered greater career opportunities, in spite of his assuring her he would take care of her. He didn't quite understand her being so adamant about leaving what had been an idyllic existence to go there...she could have done background work on other people's recordings, sung advertising jingles, gotten in the chorus on Broadway. Sinclair visited New York often enough to have had the opportunity to introduce Liv to Carlos Brown. It had always bothered Brian that he'd been unable to convince her to stay with him; he'd never understood why she felt she had to leave metro New York...leave him. But in the Second City she'd become successful in her own right, forming a following even before her duet with Carlos. In spite of his pain and hurt at her leaving him, he was proud of her.

He wanted to ask about her separation, wanted to learn whether or not the marriage was really over, but his instincts told him this was not the time for questions. He merely wanted to be with her. She was as lovely as ever, even with no makeup and her figure barely discernible in that baggy sweatsuit. Being with her, his soul was at ease, even though there was a question burning in his brain that begged for an answer...

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At her request, Brian said grace. He and Liv sat across from each other on one end of the rectangular table, and Christian's high chair was set up next to Liv. The three of them held hands during the blessing, although Christian seemed restless. The moment his hand was free he picked up some of the food—chopped so small Brian couldn't recognize what it was—from his plastic child's plate with one hand, and a piece of buttered wheat bread with the other.

"Christian, you don't know what you're missing," Brian said after he'd swallowed his first bite of the tender chicken with stuffing and gravy.

"I'm just glad he's not a fussy eater," Liv observed. "Brian, I hope it was okay to pour you a glass of wine. With you here, it just seems so much more festive."

He cut into the broccoli with his fork, finding it steamed to perfection...not too crisp, yet not mushy. "It sounds like you're glad I'm here."

"I am."

He decided this was a good time to change the topic to her marriage. "Liv...I do want you to know that I'm sorry things didn't work out between you and Reese. I won't lie and say I think he was the best man for you, but more than anything, I wanted you to be happy."

"Thank you," she replied softly. "That means a lot to me." She made a dainty dab at her mouth with her cloth napkin. "I wish I could get it over with, but unfortunately, the state requires us to be separated for a year, and then it will take at least another three months."

"Does Reese plan to contest it?"

"No. He's already proposed that I keep the apartment. He's really being very generous." She raised her eyes to meet his. "I'm sure you're curious about what happened. I'll tell you. He was cheating on me."

Brian almost said, I know. Instead he said, "I'm sorry, Liv. You didn't deserve that."

"I thought we were happy. It came as quite a shock. He was flying back from Kenya. He told me he had a layover in London, but he was right down there in the Village, just a few miles away. He'd kept his old apartment there, even though he lied to me and said he was trying to sell it. A couple of punks got fresh with his girlfriend on the street, and he got into a fight with them. He clocked one of them, but the other one got away. He was brought to the emergency room with a sprained elbow and a cracked rib, and the police called me. That's how I found out. I told him right then and there that I wanted a divorce." She sighed heavily. "Nine more months to go. I wish I could fast-forward. I hate the feeling of being in limbo."

"I'm surprised Reese didn't stay in New York for Christian's first Christmas."

"We'd actually made plans to spend it in Aruba with his parents and some friends of theirs months ago, before we separated. He tried to get me to let him take Christian with him, but I said no. I'm glad he went on ahead. Seeing him today would have been very unpleasant. I convinced him that Christian won't know the difference."

"Are you the custodial parent?" he asked.

"Actually, we have shared custody, but Christian lives here with me because Reese travels so much."

Brian gently pointed out, "You do realize that eventually you'll probably have to let Christian spend Christmas with his father."

"Yes, but that's when he's older. Right now he's too young."

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After dinner he helped her clear the table and put the food away, then excused himself to use the restroom. When he returned, Liv and Christian had moved into the living room. It struck Brian for the first time that aside from the giant Christmas tree, no other holiday decorations were in evidence. An old black-and-white Christmas-themed movie played on one of the cable networks on the large plasma television. Liv appeared to be rocking Christian to sleep. As Brian approached and saw the pillowcase folded lengthwise over her shoulder, and the bare skin of her midsection exposed as she'd pulled one side of her sweatshirt up to her collarbone, he realized she was nursing him.

He stood wordlessly several feet away from the sofa and watched, even though the pillowcase didn't allow him to see much. It shielded Christian's entire face, only the side, top, and back of his head were visible. He felt a stab of jealousy as he once again wished this was his son taking her breast.

When he found his voice, he said, "I guess now it's Christian's turn to say to me that I don't know what I'm missing...except I do know."

She cast him a chiding glance. "Don't go there."

"No point in pretending, Liv. I haven't forgotten how it was with us...have you?"

She didn't answer, instead placed her hand on her son's chubby leg. "I think someone's soon going to be ready for his bath and bed."

"It's a little early for me, but if you insist, I won't object."

She looked at him sharply, and only when he winked at her did she burst into laughter. "For a minute, I thought you were serious."

"I had you there for a minute, didn't I? He moved closer and pointed at Christian with his chin. "How long will you be breast-feeding him?"

"I'll start weaning him after his first birthday, so very soon. To be honest, it can hurt since he's had teeth." Her laughter turned to a gasp when, without warning, Brian reached out and pulled the pillowcase away, exposing her unstrapped nursing bra and the upper and lower swells of her breast, her nipple hidden by Christian's greedy mouth, but her round brown areola fully visible. She flashed him a look of pure distress. "Why did you do that, Brian?"

"Because I wanted to see you bonding with your baby firsthand." His eyes met hers and held her gaze. "It's a beautiful thing to witness."

She shifted her body away from him. "I don't want to be rude, but I'm not accustomed to having an audience."

I'll bet Reese watched. He wanted to ask her, Don't you know that it breaks my heart, knowing that he shared things with you that I can only dream of?

He wisely kept quiet, instead lowering the pillowcase with the intent of draping it back into place. His breath caught in his throat when at that moment Christian decided he'd had enough and let go of her breast, exposing the dark brown nipple to his eyes. He froze at the sight of it, unaware of anything else...until he felt a pull. Liv had snatched the case from his hand and covered herself. He watched as she fumbled underneath the cover to reattach her bra with her left hand while holding Christian in the crook of her right arm. "Do you want me to take him for you?" he offered.

"No, I can manage."

She seemed upset, and he feared he'd overstepped, taking a liberty to which he had no right.

He quickly thought of a way to possibly break the tension, and went to get the bag he'd left by the door.

Approaching with the two wrapped packages, he said, "I almost forgot. I brought a little bit of Christmas for both of you."

He could tell from her facial expression that she wanted to stay angry at him, but couldn't. "Thank you, Brian. That was very thoughtful of you."

Christian immediately reached for one of the small bright red packages. The drugstore didn't offer gift wrapping, so Brian had bought a roll of paper and some tape and done it himself in the car, rather crudely. Remembering that the smaller package was for the baby, he gave it to him. To his amusement, Christian seemed content to play with the box.

Liv laughed. "He hasn't quite mastered the concept that there's something in the packages," she said. "I only wrapped a few of his gifts for him, and I ended up tearing the paper myself, although eventually he did help."

"I'll just get him started." Without taking the package from Christian, Brian tore open one edge of the paper. Christian then seemed to realize the drill and set about tearing off the remainder of the paper. He pulled out the open-faced box holding a little red toy car, at which point Brian wrestled it from the child's surprisingly strong grip. Christian's face puckered up, but his expression quickly changed to one of awe when Brian removed the car from the box, placed it on the floor, and it began moving on its own, making a putt-putt sound as it moved.

"Oh, Christian, look at that!" Liv exclaimed.

The baby laughed and promptly began crawling after it.

Brian turned to Liv. "Time for you to open yours."

"All right." She picked up the package and tore off the paper. Inside was a Jean Naté gift

set consisting of body splash and lotion. She'd kept some on top of her bureau in her cabin aboard the ship where their affair began four years before, and she found it touching that he remembered after all this time.

"I remember seeing it during the cruise," he said, echoing her thoughts. "I hope you still use it."

"Every day. Thank you, Brian." They smiled at each other, and Liv bit her lip nervously... because she thought she saw love in his eyes. But that couldn't be...could it?

She needed time, needed to think. She put the gift box on the coffee table and stood. "Would you watch Christian for me? I want to clean the kitchen. I bathe him in the kitchen sink, because it's nice and deep."

"Sure, go ahead."

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After she had restored the kitchen to order and loaded the dishwasher, he joined her in the kitchen as she bathed Christian, who enjoyed splashing both of them with his bathwater as he played with a yellow rubber duck. When she was done she used the faucet sprayer to rinse the soap from his body, then towed him off and put a fresh diaper on him. Brian helped apply powder and lotion to his small body, and then she gathered the baby and disappeared into what he presumed was the nursery. He waited for her in the living room.

"Everything all right?" he asked when she emerged.

"Fine. I just put him down. He'll probably be fast asleep within five minutes. I'm going to clean out the kitchen sink now."

Brian nodded. She seemed nervous, he noticed, as if she knew that the baby's presence had served as a barrier between them, a way of preventing things from becoming overly personal.

Liv was nervous. It was one thing to be interacting with both Brian and Christian, but now it was just the two of them. They hadn't so much as touched each other since he'd entered the apartment, and the air felt thick with unexpressed desire. No doubt that the physical attraction between them, always so strong, still very much existed. What would happen now?

She was scrubbing cleanser into the sink when she felt his presence behind her. She forced herself to continue, but her entire body went taut the moment he placed his palms on the outer corners of her shoulders. The handle of the scrub brush slipped out of her hand. Nervously, she reached into the sink and picked it up again when he spoke.

"Turn around and look at me, Olivia."

His request was spoken softly, as if he were coaxing her. Liv shut off the water, dried her hands on a dishtowel, and turned around.

He lightly touched her jaw with his fingertips as he gazed at her. "You are so beautiful," he whispered. His eyes earnestly searched her face. "Do you still have feelings for me, Liv? Is it the same as it used to be?"

Her mind immediately went back to an earlier time when she'd been living with him at his condo in Stamford and reluctantly told him of her decision to take a job singing in Chicago. He had looked at her in that same intense way he did now, and quietly asked her if she loved him. She'd been taken aback, for she had hoped he would profess love for her, and the last thing she expected was for him to ask about her feelings first. She'd been honest with him then, but for him to ask her that now put her in a pickle. "Brian," she said, shaking her head, "it isn't fair for you to ask me that."

"It probably isn't," he replied easily, "but nevertheless, I'd like to know."

He stood so close to her, was so devastatingly handsome, that she actually found it hard to breathe. "This isn't fair," she repeated. "Everything is happening so fast, I can hardly keep up. First I learn my husband has been cheating on me, practically since the day we were married. Everything about my life changed. I'm still trying to adjust to the fact that I'm going to be divorced, still trying to figure out what Christian and I are going to do. Now you've come back into my life, and even that came as a shock. I've had too many surprises and drastic life changes in too short a period."

"I think the only hindrance to answering my question would be if you're still in love with Reese," he acknowledged.

"I was never in love with Reese. I did love him, but I was never in love with him, not the way I—" Realizing she'd been about to confess, Liv abruptly broke off, then tried again. "We agreed we would get married because I was pregnant and we both wanted the baby. I always believed that we were making it work. Now I know differently."

He thought about her hosting Thanksgiving dinner here at her apartment. Had she actually done it alone, or had Reese been involved? "So the marriage is really over? You don't see yourself going back to him? Or have you tried that already?"

"It's over. I'll never go back to him. I don't want a man who cheats on me."

"Have you been isolating yourself like this ever since the split?"

Once again she answered in the negative. "No. I tried to function as usual. I even cooked Thanksgiving dinner for my family, plus Gen and Dexter. But Christmas just doesn't have the sparkle for me that it usually has."

He let out the breath he'd been holding. So there'd been no attempt at reconciliation; the break was permanent. And Liv had admitted that she still loved him. "You do realize that

you did answer my question, even if you caught yourself," he pointed out. "Don't be ashamed, Liv."

"I'm not ashamed," she snapped. "Like I said, everything's just happening too fast. Two hours ago I didn't know you would be showing up at my door. And now you ask if I still love you. That's more than a little hasty, don't you think?"

"I know it isn't fair," he acknowledged. "But just being here with you these few hours, it feels the same to me as it did when we were together. I wanted to know if you feel the same."

Liv's chin rose defiantly. "All right. I do feel it. But I'll tell you something else, Brian. I'm not comfortable with it. It just doesn't feel right. It's too soon for me to jump into a relationship with you...with anyone. Things are different now. It's not just a man and a woman. I have my son to consider."

Brian bit his lower lip. Talk about not fair. By all rights he should have been the one to have married Liv, and that baby boy should have been their child, not her child with another man. She was right about that; the fact that Liv and Reese did have a child together meant nothing would really be the same for them, but Brian didn't see the baby's existence as a hindrance. He loved Liv, and by extension he loved her son. He liked to think his love for Christian would be no different than that he'd have for the children he hoped Liv would one day bear for him...but he did realize the subtle difference between the two. Christian already had a father who was actively involved in his life, even if he made his home with his mother. Boundaries would have to be drawn and respected. In spite of that, he was convinced he would have his own special place in the boy's life.

Liv wore a stoic look, as if she expected him to back out once she reminded him she had a child. He sought to reassure her. "Christian doesn't affect my feelings for you, Liv. I know he's Reese's child, but I love him already."

Her eyes closed and her shoulders shook with emotion, and he pulled her into his arms. "It's all right, Liv," he soothed. "I probably shouldn't have pressed you. But I had to know if you feel the same as I do. I had to know," he repeated.

Her voice came out muffled by his sweater. "I thought—"

"You thought I came to see you only because of what we once meant to each other. You didn't think I'd still want you because of Christian." He looked at her, and she nodded confirmation. "Not at all. I want you more now than I ever did." He felt her body stiffen and immediately understood why. "Don't worry. I know you're still legally married to Reese. That doesn't feel right to me, either. I'm not going to try to make love to you. Not because I don't want to, but because it wouldn't be right, not in the same bed you shared with him." He chuckled. "Of course, if we were at my place, I don't think I'd be able to be so noble."

Liv managed to chuckle through her anguish.

"I think I should leave now."

Her eyes widened. She clearly hadn't expected that. "So soon?"

With an arm around her, he walked her to the foyer and retrieved his coat from the chair where he'd dropped it. "Believe me, Liv, I don't want to. I want more than anything to spend more time with you. I've waited for you a long time. But I can't only think of myself and what I want. I have to think of what's best for you and Christian." He removed his arm and stood opposite her, so they faced each other.

She looked up at him, her forehead wrinkled in confusion. "I don't understand what you mean."

"Liv, wealthy people like Reese have been known to be underhanded in situations like this. Maybe he was being genuine when he suggested you keep this apartment. But maybe he plans on trying to sneak out of giving you anything. For all you know, he may have someone watching, making note of your comings and goings, and also those of any visitors you may have. I can't risk his forcing you out of your home or not giving you what's rightfully yours if he tries to prove you were having an affair with me, so I shouldn't stay too long."

Her mouth dropped open. She had never even considered such a possibility.

"I don't mean to disillusion you, but I have to consider that angle." He took her hands in his and gazed into her eyes. When he spoke, his voice sounded strangled and tortured. "Olivia, I have never wanted to make love to you as much as I do right now. It kills me to have to leave you when I've waited so long to be with you again." His grip tightened on her hands.

"I'm afraid to even kiss you," he said. "But Reese has had access to this unit. For all I know, he might have had some type of sophisticated surveillance system installed to watch you."

"Don't you think that's a little far-fetched?" she asked, incredulous. "It sounds like something straight out of James Bond."

Brian shook his head. "Maybe I'm being overly cautious, but it is possible. And you have a lot to lose. Not only can he get away with giving you next to nothing if he proves you were cheating on him, but with a slick attorney representing him, he can get custody of Christian, even with all the traveling he does. I'm sure his mother will be only too happy to volunteer her services."

That possibility filled her with fear. "My God," she whispered.

"I'm not saying this to frighten you, Liv. I just want you to realize what all is at stake

here, to make you see that simply because Reese appears to be cooperative and generous, it might be a cover for him scheming for a way out. So I think our contact should be limited. He can get your cell phone records, your house phone as well, even email if he's determined and willing to pay. But he can't monitor your regular mail."

Her face fell. "You mean I can't talk to you all?"

"I think an occasional call, every four or five days, but no more frequently than that, and even then, only for a few minutes."

"But Brian—"

"I know it's hard. I'll be missing you just as much, Liv. But it needs to be done, for your own protection. We should wait until all the papers are signed, all the I's dotted, all the T's crossed."

Liv absorbed this with difficulty. She knew he spoke the truth about missing her. When he squeezed her hand, only her sense of his anguish kept her from squealing in pain. She did understand his frustration, and she shared it. It would probably be another year before her divorce became final. Just with looking at him, it was all she could do to not throw her arms around him and kiss him with all the passion she held in her heart.

"So all we can do is write to each other?" she asked, her frustration surfacing in her tone.

"Even with that, you'll have to be very careful about where you keep my letters, or maybe do like Mission: Impossible and destroy them before they self-destruct." Brian chuckled at his joke, then grew silent, obviously thinking. "I do have a suggestion."

"What?" she asked, with such speed they both laughed, momentarily breaking the tension.

"We'll be safe from any possible surveillance tactics in Old Saybrook. I'll make sure I get there whenever you're visiting your parents. We can be together there."

The memories of his mother plotting to keep them apart came rushing back, and Liv wasn't sure how her own parents, who'd been unaware of her romantic history with Brian, would react to the news that they had a personal connection that dated back several years. Even if she and Brian managed to keep their relationship under wraps, eventually their families would have to know about it.

She nodded over a lump in her throat, trying to tell herself she had nothing to fear, but not quite believing it.

The thought of Denise Price brought up another concern she needed to address. "I'm sure your parents are sorry you didn't have Christmas dinner with them. I hope they won't be too upset with me." My ears should be burning from your mother's tirade.

"They don't know why I left. And I gave strict orders to Ivan and Sinclair not to say anything other than that I went to the aid of a friend. They'll know about us soon enough, and as for my missing dinner, they'll get over it." After a few seconds' pause, Brian said, "Would I be able to take one more look at Christian before I go?"

"Of course. Come with me."

She led him to the nursery. As she predicted, Christian had fallen asleep, his small chest rising and falling as he breathed.

"He's an angel," Brian said. "I could stand here and watch him for hours." Chuckling, he added, "I gather he hasn't been for his first haircut yet." He fingered a long strand of coarse-textured hair. "He looks like a miniature Dr. Cornel West without the glasses."

"My mother-in-law has been nagging me to bring him to the barber, but I want to hold off. I kind of like it. Once it's cut he'll be less my baby and more my little boy. I'm not ready for that, even though I know he'll be walking soon."

They stood next to each other before the crib, but not particularly close, wordlessly looking at the sleeping baby.

"I guess I need to get going," he finally said.

They turned and left the room. Liv gasped when Brian suddenly grabbed her arm and pulled her into the powder room. "This is one room where I'm sure there's no surveillance," he said. "I couldn't leave without this." He tilted her chin and covered her mouth with his.

It had been nearly four years since the last time they'd kissed, and every one of them melted away. Liv's body burned for him, her heart ached for him. Currents of desire ran through her, from her feminine core outward, as her arms went around his neck and she melded her body into his.

"Oh, Liv," he whispered when their lips broke apart.

"I know. It's as if no time has passed at all." She hesitated only a moment before admitting, "I do still love you, Brian. I never really stopped loving you."

"You are the love of my life. It's going to take superhuman strength to keep from making love to you right here," he murmured against her throat. "Promise me you'll come to Old Saybrook as soon as you can."

"I will."

"I want us to be together for New Year's. I've been invited to a party in Connecticut, and I want you to come with me. I was hoping your parents could take care of Christian." Brian paused. "It won't be a problem for you to leave the city, will it?"

She nodded. "I'll ask my parents if they're available to take care of Christian. And no, my going to Old Saybrook won't be a problem. Reese won't be back from Aruba until January third. We've already agreed that he'll have a few days with Christian when he returns. He's hired a nanny to come in and care for him while he's at work. We'll have Christian's first birthday party here on January tenth. I'm praying the weather cooperates. My parents are planning to come down, and Jasmine and her family, and Gen and Dexter will bring their kids, and so will Cesca and Terrence. Reese and his parents will round it out."

"How is the relationship between Reese and your parents?"

"They haven't seen each other since we separated. I'm expecting it'll be a little strained, but I'm counting on everyone to be on their best behavior, for Christian's sake." After a moment's pause, she added, "I wish you could be there, too, but obviously that's not such a hot idea."

"I agree. As much as I'd love to be there to celebrate Christian's milestone, I'll have to be satisfied looking at the pictures. But can you get up to Connecticut even before New Year's Eve? If you can get your parents to babysit, I'd like to take you to dinner, someplace special. We'll make it a memorable evening." Brian's eyes dipped to the vague outline of her figure in the sweatsuit, then back to her face. "Because as much as I enjoy being with Christian, I want a night alone with you."

Liv shut her eyes tightly, understanding what he meant and temporarily overcome by the mere thought of it. She opened them and smiled at him. "I don't see why I wouldn't be able to get up there within the next couple of days. I just need a little time to try and absorb all this. Like I said, I'm not accustomed to my life taking such drastic changes with this type of speed." Grinning, she added, "And it'll also give me time to get a Christmas gift for you."

"I think I know what it is."

"Oh, yeah?" she teased.

"Yeah. It's the one I already know will be a perfect fit."

The pulse in her throat throbbed, and she practically croaked her response through a throat suddenly gone dry. "Maybe."

His arms tightened around her, and he whispered against her ear. "But it's all right if it's a little tight. I like it tight."

Her breath caught in her throat with a whoosh.

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