



*Christmas
Crush*

Kate McLaughlan

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Murder and the Hurdy Gurdy Girl

Christmas Crush

by

Kate McLachlan

Yellow Rose Books

by Regal Crest

Texas

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Other things that have never changed are the steady and positive leadership of Julie (thank you!) and the unwavering support the group has shown to me and other local LGBT authors. It means more than you can imagine. Thank you.

Thanks to Tonie too, who wasn't there at the beginning but is now so much a part of me and the Spokane LGBT Book Group that I can't imagine either of us without her—except during the occasional basketball scheduling conflict, of course. I love you, T.

Dedication

For the Spokane LGBT Book Group.
And for Tonie. It is a love story, after all.

Epigraph

“Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night.”
~*A Visit from Saint Nicholas* by Clement Clarke Moore

Chapter One

THE TREES ARRIVED on the back of a flatbed truck, hundreds of them in different sizes and various shades of green. They were bound into tubes by nets and piled into pyramids. The truck backed through the gate onto the dirt lot, puffs of exhaust competing with the foggy air, and the smell of diesel overpowered any possible scent of evergreen. The driver cut the engine, opened the door, and hopped out with a clipboard in his hands.

“Got your trees here,” he said. He was short and ropey, his bald head uncovered and his eyebrows thick and gray. He looked at Jasmine, glanced at Rose who stood beside her, and asked, “Where are your unloaders?”

Jasmine exchanged a look with her sister, stretched to make herself look taller, and said, “We’re right here.”

“You? You’re kidding, right? Some of these trees are bigger than both of you put together.”

“We have more people coming,” Rose said.

The driver squinted at her. “When? I wasn’t paid to unload.”

“Any minute now,” Jasmine said. “You’re early. We can do it by ourselves until they get here. We’ll start with the small trees.” She didn’t wait for an answer. She put her hands on the platform of the truck and hauled herself up, like she was climbing out of a swimming pool.

The smallest trees were stacked on the very top of the pyramids, above Jasmine’s head but not out of reach. A rope held them in place. She pulled a small knife from her pocket and sawed at the rope in front of her. “I’ll hand them down to you, Rose. Just lay them in the aisles for now.”

“Hold on there,” the driver said. “You’re going to topple them all off of there.” He climbed up beside Jasmine and yanked the rope from her hand. “Look here, there’s three ropes. You gotta undo the top one first or they’ll bowl you over. Do like this.” He pulled out his own pocketknife, a granddaddy compared to Jasmine’s, and slashed with one quick jerk the rope binding the top of the first pyramid. The highest trees slumped with their outer binding cut, but they didn’t fall. He grabbed a tree from the top and handed it to Jasmine.

It was heavier than she expected it to be. It was only a four-foot tree, but it was dense with its branches tightly wrapped in netting. She turned and lowered the bundle over the side. “Here, Rose.”

“Oof.” Rose was barely taller than the tree. She hugged it to her chest and walked it to the aisle set aside for the smaller trees. By the time she came back, Jasmine cradled two more trees, dropped in her arms by the driver.

“Don’t tell my boss I helped you with this,” he said.

With both arms filled with trees, handing them down to Rose was impossible. Jasmine lowered herself to her knees, balancing the trees as she did so, and tipped them in Rose’s direction.

“Hold on,” Rose said. “I can’t take two at once.” She grabbed one of the trees as they both slid from Jasmine’s arms, but the other fell to the ground. The netting split and branches popped up like they were on springs.

“Whoops,” Jasmine said.

“Oh, smell that!” Rose said. “I just love the smell of fresh Christmas trees, don’t you?”

“You never done this before, have you?” the driver asked, another tree in his hands.

“I know what I’m doing,” Jasmine said. “I did plenty of research. This is a prime location for selling Christmas trees, and these trees are the best you can buy.”

“They are that.” The driver looked around the lot. “But I don’t even see a shed or nothing. It takes more than trees to run a Christmas tree lot, you know.”

Jasmine followed his gaze. She’d worked hard the last few days getting the lot ready, but there wasn’t much to show for it. A card table, a folding chair, a wooden stool, and a cash box was their office. A bare spot of dirt in the back was marked off with tiny orange cones to make a loading area. Ropes strung between wooden poles created aisles for the trees, and strands of twinkling lights were strung across the top to create the effect of snow falling from the sky, though they really didn’t show in the daylight. It wasn’t much, but she was hopeful. The location was excellent, with a busy street on the south side, lots of parking on the east side, and a light pole on the western edge to provide electricity.

“Selling trees is no picnic,” the driver continued. “It takes some muscle.”

“I’m stronger than I look,” Jasmine said.

“Me too,” Rose said. She propped the freed tree against the fence near the front gate and moved a branch to cover an exposed portion of the trunk. “There. Our first advertising tree.”

“You got any stands?” the driver asked.

“We’re making cross stands from boards,” Jasmine said.

“Lotta work.”

“Yeah, but we don’t need many. Just for display. Most people already have stands at home.”

“You telling the truth about your helpers? I can’t spend all morning unloading your trees.”

“Yes, and there’s one now.”

An old yellow Volkswagen bus turned into the gate, swerved around the flatbed, and parked in the loading area.

“Dilly! C’mere,” Jasmine called. “We need your help.”

Dilly climbed out of the bus looking like he’d slept in it, which he often did, and hadn’t bothered to change his clothes from the night before. His tight jeans and short jacket emphasized his long skinny legs and tiny butt, and he still wore a spangled scarf around his neck.

“Jesus,” the driver said.

“He’s stronger than he looks too,” Jasmine said. “Dilly, we need to unload these trees.”

“I’m your man, Jazz. I excel at lumberjacking.” He wrapped his arms around Rose, picked her up, swung her around, and gave her a kiss on the lips. “There you go, Rosie-pie, now you’re not sweet sixteen and never been kissed anymore.”

“I’m seventeen, dumb ass.”

“Rose,” Jasmine said.

“He likes it when I call him that, don’t you Dilly?”

“Sure. Dumb ass, smart ass, jack ass, anything but fat ass and I’m happy.”

“Look, I gotta get this truck out of here,” the driver said. “I have other loads to deliver today.”

Jasmine clapped her gloved hands. "Okay people, let's work double time. Here, Dilly, can you carry two? Rose will show you where to put them."

"Is he all the help you got?" the driver asked.

"No, there's one more, but she's shopping."

The driver glanced at his watch. It was seven-thirty in the morning.

"It's Black Friday," Jasmine said. "Stores have been open since midnight. She'll be here."

"Great," the driver said, but not like he meant it. "Here's what we're gonna do. You climb down there with those two and I'm gonna toss them down one at a time. I don't care who catches 'em or where you put 'em, but if they're not caught, I'm tossing 'em on the ground, you hear me?"

"I hear you." Jasmine hopped to the ground and turned just in time to catch the first tree as it flew through the air. She set it aside and quickly caught the next. "Catch the trees, you guys! Don't let them hit the ground."

For the next twenty minutes they caught trees and piled them up, all of them working up a sweat, though the temperature was below freezing. The flatbed was nearly empty when an old blue Ford Escort pulled up to the curb beside the wide gate. The back of the car was filled with shopping bags. The door opened and a woman in a red wool coat and high-heeled boots stepped out, a latte in her hand.

"It's about time, Colleen," Jasmine called. "We needed your help."

"What? It's not even eight o'clock," Colleen said. "How can I be late?"

"I asked you to be here at seven."

"You really meant that?"

"I meant it. Help us unload this truck. This guy needs to get out of here."

Colleen put her latte on the card table next to the cash box. "I can't carry trees. I just bought these gloves. They were fifty percent off, but they're still real leather."

"Don't you have other gloves?" Jasmine asked. "For heaven's sake, why did you dress like that? You knew this was a Christmas tree lot. Did you think you wouldn't have to touch the trees?"

"I thought you were supposed to be shopping for other people," Rose said.

Colleen laughed. "Yeah, right. Why do you think they mark everything fifty percent off? It's so you can spend the other fifty percent on yourself. Duh."

"You better hope Santa brings you something nice, Rosie," Dilly said, "because Colleen sure won't."

"Don't be a douche, Dylan. Rose knows I always get her something nice, don't I sweetie?"

"Of course," Rose said.

"Don't worry about these trees, ladies," the driver said, tossing another tree into Jasmine's waiting arms. "Jazzy and I got it covered."

"Hey," Dilly said.

The driver ignored him. "You're pretty strong for a little gal," he said to Jasmine.

"Thanks, but you really shouldn't call Dilly a lady."

"Oh, he likes it when I call him that," the driver said. "Don't you Dilly?"

Even Dilly laughed.

Minutes later Jasmine signed for the delivery and the truck sped off. She looked at the piles of trees, the empty aisles, and her three helpers. Colleen looked like she'd be more comfortable selling makeup at Nordstrom than selling trees, and for that matter, so did Dilly. Rose, of course, would do whatever Jasmine asked. They were her best friends, and she was immensely grateful

they were willing to help her out for the pittance she was able to pay them, but the bulk of the work and the responsibility for running the show, Jasmine knew, was hers. She took a deep breath.

“Okay, let’s start with the tallest trees,” Jasmine said. “They go in the back and get shorter as we get to the front of the lot. The shortest trees go in the front row. Remove the nets and fluff the branches out so they look full and beautiful. We can’t put them all up. About two thirds should be left in their nets and stacked in the back by Dilly’s bus.”

“Where do we pee?” Colleen asked.

“I used the bathroom in that gas station over there,” Rose said.

Colleen raised her beautifully waxed eyebrows. “A gas station bathroom?”

“Well,” Dilly said, “you are in a forest of trees.”

“No peeing on the trees!” Jasmine said. “Hurry up and go, Colleen. We have a lot to do. It’s early, but this is the day the early birds buy trees. In fact, I changed my mind. Don’t start in the back, start in the front. That way people driving by will see the beautiful trees and stop and buy one.”

For the next three hours, they hauled trees and attached them to the display ropes with wires and strings, unfurling branches and rotating trunks as they went so that each tree was displayed to its best advantage. All four were artistic, or thought they were, and they spent more time than perhaps they should have working on the arrangement of the trees. But they were rewarded by seeing cars slow down to look at the display, sometimes to the point of crawling on the busy street.

Soon, Jasmine was sure, they would stop to buy. She really had done her homework, and she knew this was an excellent location to sell Christmas trees. She’d studied the demographics, the traffic patterns, the layout of the lot and its exposure, and made sure it had electricity, easy access, and ample room to load trees onto cars. She’d studied trees, bought the best—mostly noble fir, Douglas fir, and a few rare alpines— and she’d ordered them early. She’d rented security fencing and had it installed in advance. She’d obtained a business license and a permit to sell, and she’d designed and made live a website so that people could order their trees on-line and pick them up or even have them delivered.

In the dark evenings of November, when it was still too early to sell, she’d painted signs with meticulous care and artistic flair. “Jazzy’s Fresh Christmas Trees,” they said. They were works of art in their own right, paintings of magnificent Christmas trees in a forest primeval naturally decorated with icicles, holly, and diaphanous angels. It was only a matter of time before they drew people in.

Rose and Colleen took another potty break while Jasmine and Dilly drilled holes in the bottoms of a select number of trees to attach the wooden stands they’d built from an example Jasmine found online. The design for the stand was simple and required only some two-by-fours, a saw, a hammer, and some nails. Attaching the stand to the tree, though, proved more difficult. They had to drill a hole up the center of the trunk from the bottom. It had to be long enough to hold the tree while standing and straight enough to keep it upright.

After their fourth failed attempt in a row, Dilly tossed the drill to the ground with a pout. “I can’t do anything straight, you know that.”

“C’mon, Dilly, this one was better. Don’t give up. I can’t do it by myself.”

“Make Colleen and Rose do it. They’re straight enough.”

“I am anyway,” Colleen said coming up behind them. “Rose is still too young to know.”

“Jazz, we got a problem,” Rose said, creases between her brows. “The gas station guy says we can’t use their bathroom anymore, not unless we buy something every single time.”

“What?” Jasmine stood up, stretched her back, and glared across the street. “That stinky rat. Doesn’t he know we’re going to bring him business? How can we stay open twelve hours a day without a bathroom?”

“He said you should just rent a port-a-potty,” Colleen said, “like they did at that other lot.”

“Well, he can just—” Jasmine stopped. “Other lot? What other lot?”

“The one on the next corner,” Colleen said, pointing west. “They have two port-a-potties.”

Jasmine felt her blood freeze. She stared at the street where cars still streamed by and told herself other lot could mean anything, a used car lot or a sandlot or maybe a farmer’s market. She walked to the sidewalk, looked west, and her heart dropped to her feet.

It was a Christmas tree lot.

And not just any old Christmas tree lot. Even from the sidewalk she could tell it was enormous. A portable electronic sign was installed where cars couldn’t miss it, with moving lighted arrows directing traffic into its driveway while the sign flashed “Trees! Free Cider! Santa! Gifts Galore!”

She walked on wooden legs down the block, her breath coming short as she took in the spectacle that opened up before her. An army of workers in orange vests assisted shoppers, and there were a lot of shoppers. The drivers Jasmine thought had been slowing to admire her trees were actually just waiting their turn to be waved into the colossal Christmas tree lot just one block away. A bouncy castle perched on one corner of the lot. Nearby, children with sticky candy canes in their fists waited their turn to sit on the lap of an authentic looking Santa.

The trees must have been set out the night before, and the fog had crystalized into hoarfrost creating a thick layer of natural flocking on every branch. As she stared, a break in the weather parted the clouds and a ray of sun shone down on the trees making the frost sparkle. In another part of the lot, for those who preferred color, trees were being sprayed with blue and white and pink flocking.

And, of course, there were the port-a-potties.

A teenage boy welcomed Jasmine to the lot, pressed a cup of cider into her hand, and urged her to let him know if she had any questions. A girl behind him popped popcorn from a cart on wheels and offered her a bag. Christmas music played on a sound system throughout the lot, nearly masking the sound of a chainsaw trimming the butts off purchased trees before they were loaded into pickups or tied on top of cars. A red and white striped awning covered a shopping area where a young woman stood behind a computerized cash register, swiping credit cards and ringing up trees. Not just trees, though. People were buying wreathes and swags, bowls of scented pine cones, tree preservative powder, tree removal bags, and Christmas tree stands.

Real Christmas tree stands.

Jasmine spun in a circle and took it all in, her blood simmering through her veins. Then, like the lighted candle tree decorations she remembered from her childhood, it began to boil. She clenched her fists and marched up to the cash register, pushing past the customers who waited in line. “What do you think you’re doing here?” she demanded.

The girl at the register looked up mid-transaction, her eyes wide. “This is a Christmas tree lot. We sell Christmas trees and things.”

“I can see that,” Jasmine said. “I know what you’re doing, but this is my location. You can’t sell trees here.”

The girl frowned. “Are you sure?” She looked over her shoulder. “Because we always...”

“Of course I’m sure. I did my research. You’re encroaching.”

The girl’s face turned dark red. “Lady, I think you’re, like, wrong.”

“Hey, lady, leave the kid alone,” said a woman standing in line. “She just works here. Let her sell us our trees.”

“Yeah,” said another customer. “Or at least go to the end of the line.”

Jasmine looked at the people in line. They carried tags to identify the trees they wanted to purchase, and most carried other items as well. They all eyed her like she was the Grinch trying to steal their Christmas. She looked back at the girl. She was not much older than Rose, Jasmine realized. She had strawberry hair tied in short pigtails with red and green ribbons, and her skin was smooth and blemish free except for a scattering of cheap metal jewelry embedded in her lips, her chin, and even her cheeks.

“Is there a problem here?”

A woman had emerged from the long RV parked behind the awning. She appeared to be in her early thirties. She wore faded jeans, boots, a blue Gonzaga sweatshirt, and a Spokane Indians baseball cap. She was dressed to work, but she was clearly in charge.

“Yes, there’s a problem,” Jasmine said. “What are you doing here? This is my location.”

The woman’s brows rose. “It is?” She stepped away from the register and inclined her head to the side, as if urging Jasmine to follow her.

Jasmine held her ground. “Do you have a permit to be here?”

“I do,” the woman said agreeably. She inclined her head again. “Shall we step away from the crowd?”

Jasmine crossed her arms and didn’t budge. “When did you get it? I’ve had my permit since October.”

The woman seemed to abandon her attempt to make Jasmine move and instead stepped closer and lowered her voice, a textbook response to dealing with an angry customer. “What do you mean this is your location? Your location for what?”

Jasmine glared but didn’t answer. She didn’t need to. She saw the woman’s brows lift and the start of a smile raise her lips as understanding came to her. “I get it,” she said. “You’re Jazzy.”

Jasmine lifted her chin. “My name is Jasmine. And I was told when I leased that lot that it’s the best location around here for selling Christmas trees.”

“Well, my name is Darcy,” the woman said. “I’m the manager here, and it is a great location, except for the fact that we’re already here. We’ve sold trees here for four years in a row.”

Jasmine’s jaw dropped, and so did her heart. “Are you kidding me?” She spun around, taking in again the noise and the bustle and the chaos going on around them—the shrieking children, Santa’s ho-ho-ho, the buzz of the chainsaw, and the constant electronic pinging of the cash register ringing up sales.

She felt sick. And furious. She was furious with the owner of her lot, who must have known of the spectacle that would erupt at Christmas time only a block away, and she was furious with herself for not checking into the local competition, but most of all she was furious with this woman, this Darcy, so calmly getting rich off the commercialized frenzy of the Christmas season. “This place is a—a—a monstrosity!”

“A monstrosity?”

“Yes.” Jasmine spun back around and met Darcy’s eyes. They were greenish-gray, she noticed, a pretty shade, but marred by the laughter in them—laughter at Jasmine’s expense. “It’s so commercialized. This is Christmas at its worst. Christmas isn’t all about making money, you know.”

“Oh? I suppose you don’t plan to make money selling your trees?”

“I do, but it’ll be honest money from selling quality trees.”

The humor in Darcy’s face disappeared and her eyes narrowed. “There is nothing dishonest about this operation,” she said. “And our trees are just fine.”

She may have gone too far, Jasmine realized, in suggesting Darcy’s business wasn’t honest, but she was too angry to apologize. “Look, all I’m saying is, you don’t need all this loud gimmicky stuff to make a profit selling Christmas trees.”

“Good.” Darcy crossed her arms over her chest. “Then it shouldn’t bother you a bit that we’re here.”

“It doesn’t,” Jasmine said.

They glared at each other a moment longer before Jasmine spun on her heel and marched out of the lot, ignoring the chorus of cheery young voices wishing her a Merry Christmas as she left. She stalked down the sidewalk to her corner.

She couldn’t help making comparisons. Charming was the effect she’d aimed for with her lot. She’d created it to be the lot she would want to visit if she were shopping for a tree. Looking at it now, though, her charming Christmas tree lot was simply gray and silent and dreary.

The trees at the entrance were beautiful trees, but they were plain. There was no flocking, natural or otherwise. There were no decorations, no candy canes, and no Christmas tree skirts to hide the plain wooden Charlie Brown stands at the bottom.

Jasmine inhaled deeply, trying to let the natural pine scent soothe her as she passed into the lot. There were no customers. Colleen was in her car talking on her cell phone. Dilly stood in the far corner of the lot sneaking a cigarette, though Jasmine had strictly ordered no smoking. Rose sat on the folding chair beside the card table making notes in a three-ring binder. She looked up when Jasmine entered, a question in her eyes.

Jasmine bit her lip. The success of this Christmas tree lot meant everything to them, more than Rose even knew. What were they going to do now?

WHILE JASMINE AND Dilly worked on setting up more trees on stands, Rose and Colleen went out to the sidewalk to try to lure customers in. Colleen returned within ten minutes complaining that her feet hurt, and Rose came back a half hour later. “People keep looking at me,” she complained.

“That’s the whole point,” Jasmine said. “They look at you and you wave them in. You’re so cute, they won’t be able to resist.”

Rose rolled her eyes.

“How many trees do you have to sell in a day to make a profit?” Colleen asked.

Jasmine had already done the calculations, adding the rent of the lot and the fence to the cost of the trees and the tiny wage she’d agreed to pay her helpers. “Just to break even, we’d probably have to sell about eighteen a day.”

“Yikes,” Rose said. It was afternoon already, and they hadn’t sold any.

“I know.” Jasmine slumped in her chair. “It’s all my fault. I should have known about that other lot.”

“Why didn’t you?” Colleen asked. “I thought you did all that research.”

“I did,” Jasmine said, “last summer. That lot was selling used cars or something back then. It never occurred to me it sold trees at Christmas. The jerk who leased the lot to me told me this

was the best place around for selling Christmas trees. He had to have known about that other lot. He deliberately didn't tell me. I know I should have checked, but he gave me such a good deal."

"Now we know why," Colleen said.

"Okay, fine. I screwed up," Jasmine said. "The question is, what do we do about it?"

"Maybe we could have a sale," Rose suggested.

"Yeah," Dilly said. "Jack the prices up seventy-five percent and then sell them for fifty percent off. Stores do it all the time. It worked with Colleen's gloves."

"Huh?" Colleen frowned at her hands.

"How much are they charging for trees at the other lot?" Rose asked.

"I didn't look," Jasmine said.

"I'll go check," Colleen said. "Come with me, Dilly."

"No, you go without me," Dilly said. "I'm going to make some phone calls. Caleb and Mike buy a tree every year, and Justin and Aaron have a baby this year. They have to buy a tree. Why not buy from the gay friendliest lot in town?" He returned to his smoking corner, lit a cigarette, and started making calls.

"Maybe you should advertise in the gay community," Rose suggested. "Put up a rainbow flag or something."

"Yeah, that's not a bad idea," Jasmine said. She already had the website. She could post the link to the gay on-line communities, and she could post on Facebook and Twitter. She borrowed Rose's notebook and started a list.

Colleen returned a few minutes later with a bag of popcorn in her hand. "That place is amazing. Can you believe they give reindeer rides?"

"Reindeer?" Rose asked.

"Well, ponies with antlers tied on their heads."

"Never mind about the reindeer, what about the trees?" Jasmine asked.

"They have a ton of them," Colleen said. "The scrawny ones are fifteen dollars. The biggest I saw was fifty. Most of them are about twenty-five dollars."

"We have better trees than they do," Jasmine said. "We can't sell our trees for that price, but we have a better product. How do we get that word out?"

"Maybe we should give something away too," Rose said, "like popcorn or pony rides."

"We'd need money for something like that," Jasmine said.

"Do we have any money?" Rose asked.

"We won't," Jasmine said glumly, "after they deliver the port-potty."

The crease between Rose's brows reappeared.

Dilly's friends came through, though. Justin and Aaron came by with their new baby. They winced at the price of the big trees and chose a small one instead. "We'll get her a bigger tree when she's older," Aaron said. Caleb and Mike stopped by as well, and brought friends with them. They congregated in Dilly's smoking corner and had a noisy impromptu party. Some of them even bought trees. By dark they had sold seven.

"It's a start," Rose said. It was the voice she used when trying to assure Jasmine that everything would be all right.

"Yeah, it's a great start," Jasmine said, trying to sound like she meant it. It wasn't fair for Rose to worry about it.

"I'm going to take off now," Dilly said. It was barely six o'clock, but he'd been there for over ten hours. Colleen had left hours earlier to catch up on the sleep she'd missed to hit the Black Friday sales.

“Okay,” Jasmine said. She was tired and dispirited, and she knew Rose was too, but they couldn’t leave yet. Most Christmas tree sales occurred in the evenings. They would have to stay until nine o’clock, at least on their first day.

It was quiet after Dilly and his friends left. Jasmine glanced up. The lights she’d strung across the tops of the poles twinkled in the darkness. When she squinted it really did look like sparkling snow coming down on the tops of the trees. She could hear the Christmas music coming from the other lot, but the distance made it faint so that it enhanced the peaceful feeling in the lot. Jasmine walked into the center of the trees until Rose and the card table and the street were all out of sight. She turned in a slow circle and let her senses soak in the beauty of it. It was like being in a forest. A Christmas forest. It was exactly the effect she’d been looking for when she’d planned her Christmas tree lot, but it didn’t bring in any business.

As if to prove her wrong, just then a car turned into the drive and stopped in the loading area. A woman got out. She was elderly, slightly hunched over, but was able to walk unassisted. Rose approached her, eager and smiling, but the woman waved her away. “I just like to look around.”

Jasmine strolled through the lanes of trees and tried to act like she wasn’t watching the customer. The woman quickly examined some of the small trees and moved slowly toward the larger ones. She stopped occasionally and leaned into a tree, caressed its branches, pinched a needle, and sniffed her fingers. She glanced up at the twinkle lights more than once. She returned to a medium sized tree, stroked its branches upward, then down, and bent over to examine the ground below, which was free of needles. Apparently satisfied, she looked around for help. Jasmine approached.

“I’ll take this one,” the woman said.

“It’s sixty dollars,” Jasmine said, trying not to sound apologetic.

The woman merely nodded. “Can you tie it to the top of my car?”

“Of course.” Jasmine guided the woman back to the card table to complete the transaction.

Rose took the money, while Jasmine gathered ropes.

Most people came to the lot prepared to load their own trees, and Dilly had helped with those who hadn’t, but Jasmine was confident she and Rose could manage it on their own.

“I just love these traditional Christmas tree lots,” the woman said.

“Traditional?” Jasmine asked.

“You know, quiet,” the woman said. “They remind me of when I was young, when our whole family would go out together and choose a tree. I tried to pick out a tree at that other lot.” She inclined her head west. “But I couldn’t even think.”

“Yes,” Jasmine agreed. “It’s a monstrosity.”

The woman laughed. “I don’t know if I would go that far. It has its place, like anything else. Some people like that kind of bustle. But some of us like this sort of Christmas tree lot too, and they’re hard to find.”

Jasmine and Rose dragged the folding chair and stool over to the woman’s car and set one up on each side. The woman handed them a blanket, which they spread across the top of the car to protect the paint. Rose held the tree steady while Jasmine climbed onto her chair. She gripped the trunk near the top of the tree with her left hand and hefted it up as Rose raised the bottom toward her. Jasmine reached through the branches with her right hand, grabbed the trunk, and balanced it carefully while Rose ran around the car to climb on the stool.

The next step was simple. She and Dilly had done it several times already that day. Just lift the tree and roll it onto the top of the car. Lift and roll. Easy. But she couldn’t lift the tree.

She'd been unloading, carrying, and lifting trees all day long. She ordered her arms to move, but without Dilly's help, she simply did not have the strength to lift the tree even another inch.

"Rose," she gasped. "I can't—Can you—Oh oh." The tree tilted toward the ground.

Suddenly the bottom of the tree rose and the weight was lifted.

"It's okay. I got it," a soft voice said. She was nudged with a shoulder. "Step down, Jasmine. I got it."

Chapter Two

MANAGING A DOZEN young teenagers was like trying to corral a herd of gnats. They had the attention spans and impulse control of toddlers, but they moved a lot faster and had a roller coaster of hormones rushing through them. Most of them had never been trusted to deal with customers, to handle money, to serve snacks and drinks, and they were heady with the power of it. After four years, Darcy had learned just how much reign to give them and how much control she needed to keep, but it still took all her attention to keep the management of the SleepSafe Youth Christmas Tree lot under control.

Nearly all her attention, anyway. For some reason, no matter how busy she was dealing with the crises that continually erupted on the lot that day, Darcy couldn't stop thinking of that girl with the chocolate eyes calling her Christmas tree lot a monstrosity.

How was she doing over there? Darcy remembered the difficult time she'd had managing SleepSafe Youth's lot that first year, and she'd had quite a bit of business experience behind her by then. Jasmine didn't seem old enough to have that kind of experience. Did she have anyone advising her? Her mistake in renting that lot in the first place suggested she didn't.

Throughout the afternoon, Darcy stepped to the sidewalk and looked at the "Jazzy's Fresh Christmas Trees" sign. She didn't see any activity, but then she probably wouldn't. The driveway for that lot was around the corner on the side street. The trees could be flying off the lot, for all Darcy knew, though she hadn't noticed a slowdown of her own business.

The last time she'd stood looking down the sidewalk, Wesley had interrupted her thoughts. "Darcy, Caitlin's pissing off the Q-tips."

"The what?" Darcy asked. She glanced at the register, where Caitlin appeared to be arguing with a white-haired couple.

"Q-tips. You know, old people." Wesley patted the top of his head. Red Christmas bulbs dangled from the holes in his ears, two on each side, and they clanked against each other when he moved his head. "She won't give them senior discounts."

Darcy sighed and moved to the register. "Is there something I can help with here?"

"They're trying to get a senior discount," Caitlin said, her voice accusing. "Senior discounts are only Monday through Thursday. Today's Friday."

The woman turned to Darcy and picked up the argument. "I don't care what day of the week it is. We're in town today. Give us the discount or we'll buy our tree somewhere else."

"We got a discount here last year," the man said quietly.

"It's okay, Caitlin," Darcy said. "You can give them the discount."

Caitlin gasped dramatically. "But you said senior discounts were Monday through Thursday."

"I know I did, but we can make exceptions. These people are loyal customers and we want them to come back every year, right?"

Caitlin glowered. "They could come back on Monday," she said in a low voice, but she entered the price into the register with the twenty percent discount.

Darcy took the tag from Caitlin and smiled at the couple. "Let's go get your tree loaded. Where's your car?" After stepping away from the register, Darcy added, "I'm sorry Caitlin gave you a hard time. Homeless kids are sometimes the most rigid at enforcing rules. Most of them have been hurt for not following the rules, you know? They just can't stand to see someone else getting away with something. Most of them outgrow it. Your support helps a lot."

The woman grimaced, as if helping kids like Caitlin was an unfortunate side effect of getting a good deal on a Christmas tree, but the man smiled. "Everybody needs a safe place to sleep," he said.

"I couldn't agree more," Darcy said.

Before it grew completely dark, Darcy put the youngest of the teens into the van and ferried them back to the SleepSafe shelter. The older teens stayed to work. Most of them, like Caitlin, were paid employees, and they no longer used SleepSafe's shelter services, though all had been homeless at one time or another. On her trip back to the Christmas tree lot, Darcy slowed down as she drove past "Jazzy's Fresh Christmas Trees".

The lot was quiet and dark, at least compared to SleepSafe's lot. Twinkling white lights overhead cast a soft glow over the trees. Tucked into one side of the lot was a small table with two still figures sitting beside it. It was too dark to tell if one of them was Jasmine. She drove on.

SleepSafe's lot was a different world. Even with half her workers gone, the place bustled with activity. There was still a line of customers at the register as well as a cluster of kids waiting to sit on Santa's lap, and the reindeer rides were going strong.

A monstrosity, she'd called it. Darcy smiled.

Business slowed as it grew later, and Darcy wondered about security. Did "Jazzy's Fresh Christmas Trees" have any? SleepSafe's security, of course, was top of the line, with an eight-foot chain link fence, wheeled locking gates, and tower lights. And, of course, Fabio would be sleeping in the RV.

At eight o'clock she couldn't stand it anymore.

"Hold down the fort," she told the few remaining workers. "I'll be back in a jiffy."

"Where are you going?" Caitlin asked.

"Just down the street," she said. "I want to check out the competition."

"You mean that bitchy lady who yelled at me?"

"Yeah," Darcy said.

She strolled down the sidewalk to the "Jazzy's Fresh Christmas Trees" sign. She paused at the fence, looped her fingers through the chain link, and gave it a shake. Sturdy, but it was only six feet tall. She walked along to the entrance, which was marked with two small trees, one on each side, and a hand painted sign lit up by a single small spotlight. The only other light came from the street and the tiny twinkles that flashed above the miniature forest of trees. She entered the lot.

The card table she'd seen when she drove by was empty except for a cash box, a notebook, and a tiny rainbow flag in a plastic stand. Interesting. She hoped nothing was in the cash box, since there wasn't anything to stop her or anyone else from picking it up and walking off with it. At the back of the lot was a car. Jasmine stood beside it on a chair, a tree in her arms. As Darcy watched, the tree tilted, and she could tell Jasmine was in trouble. She hurried forward and grabbed the tree before it hit the ground.

"It's okay. I got it," she said.

Jasmine stood on a little folding chair not sturdy enough for two people. Darcy grasped the trunk higher up with her other hand and nudged Jasmine with her shoulder. "Step down, Jasmine. I got it."

After a moment's hesitation, Jasmine let go of the tree and jumped to the ground. Darcy stepped up and lifted the tree to the top of the car. "You have ropes?" she asked.

"Right here," a young voice called from the other side of the car, and an orange cord sailed through the air over the tree. Darcy caught it and pulled it tight, careful not to bend any branches the wrong way.

"Give it here," Jasmine said from below. Darcy handed her the rope, and Jasmine leaned inside the front door of the car and passed it back to the girl on the other side. The rope sailed over the tree again, and the process was repeated through the back door. After a final loop, Jasmine leaned in the car and tied the ends of the ropes together. Darcy climbed down and pulled the chair away from the car. A teenage girl dragged a stool around from the other side.

The elderly woman who had watched the whole process came forward with her keys in her hands. "When you get home," Jasmine said, "just tug on this end here and the knot will come free. Do you have someone to help you unload it?"

"The neighbor boy will help me," the woman said. She reached into her purse and pulled out a bill. "I want to give you girls a tip. It's not easy for women alone to do what you're doing."

Jasmine took the money and bit her lip.

"Wow, thanks," the teenage girl said.

The woman got into her car and pulled out of the lot, and finally Jasmine looked up and met Darcy's eyes. With the stubborn air of a toddler who's been ordered to share, Jasmine held the twenty-dollar bill toward Darcy.

"Here," Jasmine said. "We couldn't have got it loaded without your help."

Darcy shook her head. "I don't want your tip."

"Good." The teenager snatched the bill from Jasmine's fingers. "We need it. We haven't sold very many trees."

"Rose," Jasmine said.

"Well, we haven't." Rose looked at Darcy. "Thanks for your help. Do you want to buy a tree?"

Darcy smiled at the girl. She was about the same age as the members of Darcy's crew, but she didn't wear any of the social armor the homeless kids wore. No dyed hair or piercings or dreadlocks or homemade tattoos. She wore jeans that weren't too tight, sneakers, and an ordinary and serviceable blue jacket. Her hair was shiny, her skin was fresh and clear except for a couple of pimples on her forehead, and her eyes were bright with intelligence.

"I'm not here to buy a tree," Darcy said.

"She's the woman from the other lot," Jasmine explained. "Two port-a-potties."

Rose's eyes grew wide. "Oh."

The nature of Darcy's notoriety amused her. "My name is Darcy."

The girl smiled. "I'm Rose. I'm Jasmine's sister."

Darcy looked with some surprise from Rose, with her pale skin and blond hair, to Jasmine, whose skin was brown.

Jasmine scowled and stuffed her hands into the pockets of her red and black checked jacket. Tight black curls spiraled from her head in every direction, and her eyes were sharp as cut glass. She was as prickly as a Christmas cactus, and for some strange reason she made Darcy's pulse race.

“Why are you here?” Jasmine asked, as if trying to prove that her disposition was as different from her sister’s as her skin color.

“I got worried about your security,” Darcy said. “I think you’re new at this.”

“As you can see, we’re fine.”

“I’m kind of an expert. Security is my field. Do you mind if I look around?”

Jasmine narrowed her eyes.

“Look, if I wanted to rip you off,” Darcy said, “I would have just picked up that cash box you left sitting there and walked away with it.”

“Oh crap.” Rose hurried back to the card table.

Jasmine shrugged. “I’m not worried about you. Go ahead and look around.”

Darcy almost said thank you before she remembered she was the one performing the favor. She walked toward the gate and Jasmine followed.

“Your fence is good,” Darcy said. “But it’s kind of short. People can climb over a six-foot fence pretty easily.”

“They might be able to climb in,” Jasmine said, “but I don’t think they’ll be able to climb out very easily with a tree on their back.”

“The gate’s fine. You have a padlock like this at the other gate too? Good,” Darcy said as Jasmine nodded. “What about after you close? Is someone staying here?”

“No.”

“It’s a good idea to have someone stay on the lot,” Darcy said. “I saw a VW bus here earlier. Can you bring it back and have someone stay in it? Or at least keep a TV or radio running in it all night?”

“Why?” Jasmine asked.

“It keeps people away.” Darcy looked up. “These lights are pretty, but they won’t show someone sneaking around in here. Do you have any other lights?”

“Just what you see here,” Jasmine said. “There’s the light by the table and the lights on the signs.”

“You should get a spotlight in here, or maybe two, one at each end,” Darcy said.

“But then the twinkle lights won’t show,” Jasmine said. “It’s dark in here for a reason. It’s prettier.”

Darcy was used to working with clients who wanted her security advice. They didn’t generally argue that keeping the lights off was “prettier.” She stopped and turned. Jasmine was right behind her and they nearly collided. Jasmine stopped abruptly, looked up, and took a quick step back. Darcy grabbed her arms without thinking to keep her from tumbling backward.

Darcy had been at a loss for words even before she found her face only inches away from Jasmine’s. Seeing Jasmine so close, her startled eyes fixed on Darcy’s, robbed Darcy of any coherent thought she might still have had.

“Uh...”

Jasmine blinked, swallowed, pulled her arms from Darcy’s, and took another step back. “Look,” she said, “you seem to think I have a big commercial operation like yours. I don’t. All I have is trees, and I don’t think a tree thief is going to sneak in here at night and haul them all over the fence.”

Darcy composed herself. “Well, I guess since you don’t sell anything but trees...”

It was the wrong thing to say. She knew it as soon as Jasmine clenched her lips and shoved her fists into her pockets again.

“This is a Christmas tree lot,” Jasmine said, “not Santa’s workshop. I don’t want ugly old security lights ruining everything I’ve done here. I don’t want my lot to look like yours. Now if you’ll excuse us, we have work to do.”

Darcy glanced over at the card table, where Rose sat. She immediately turned her head away to pretend she hadn’t been watching.

“You two shouldn’t be out here alone at night,” Darcy said, making one last attempt to argue sense. “Not with cash on hand.”

“We deposit in the bank across the street twice a day,” Jasmine said.

“Besides,” Rose said sadly, “we’ve hardly made any cash at all.”

“A thief might not know that,” Darcy said, though it would have to be a pretty clueless thief not to notice that business wasn’t exactly booming. Still, thieves often were clueless, or desperate.

“We’ll be fine,” Jasmine said.

Darcy sighed. It wasn’t her business, and her advice was clearly not welcome. She was only a block away, though. Whether Jasmine knew it or not, Darcy would be keeping an eye on “Jazzy’s Fresh Christmas Trees.”

Chapter Three

SHE COULDN'T BEAT Darcy at her own game, Jasmine decided, but she could beat her at hers. Reindeer and bouncy castles and his-and-her port-a-potties exceeded Jasmine's budget, and they didn't fit her idea of what a Christmas tree lot should be anyway, but her lot had something Darcy's didn't. The words of her elderly customer kept coming back to her. Some people like traditional Christmas tree lots, and they're hard to find. Jasmine's job would be to help people find it.

Ideas swam in her head as she and Rose drove home after closing the lot for the night, but she was too exhausted to do anything about them, not without getting some sleep first. She'd never done so much physical work in one day in her life. She'd done her research, more or less, and thought she understood the commercial side of selling Christmas trees as well as anyone. Well, except for that one little error. But she may have underestimated the physical demands of dealing in trees.

Her cheeks burned at the memory of Darcy coming to her rescue when she couldn't even lift that medium sized tree. On any other day, Jasmine thought, she could have done it. If she hadn't worn her arms out from lifting so many trees already. Darcy must think she was a weakling, some little femme girl who needed help getting out of cars and stepping over puddles. Jasmine cringed at the thought.

Rose yawned hugely from the passenger seat and, as if reading Jasmine's mind, asked, "What are you going to do about loading trees when Dilly's at work and I'm at school?"

"I can load a tree by myself," Jasmine said. "I was just tired today, that's all."

"Maybe Darcy could help you. She would if you asked, I think."

"She's the competition, Rose."

"I know, but she's nice."

Jasmine didn't answer.

Moments later they pulled into the driveway of the little house they'd inherited, heavily mortgaged, when their mother died. It would be cheaper to sell it, get rid of the mortgage payment, and live in an apartment, but Jasmine had grown up in the house. She went to high school at nearby Rogers, invited friends over for snacks after softball practice, played Frisbee in the back yard, and had impromptu sleepovers in the basement. She wanted Rose to have a chance to build the same memories, as much as she could anyway, after her experiences of the last few years and without a mother. That wouldn't be possible in an apartment.

"What time in the morning?" Rose asked with another heavy yawn.

"Not as early as today," Jasmine said. "We'll leave here around nine-thirty and open at ten. Okay?"

"Sure."

They stumbled to their beds, but before Jasmine fell asleep she set the alarm for 3:00 am. She had things to do.

IT TOOK HARDLY any time at all to paint on two small pieces of plywood the word TRADITIONAL in greens and gold roughly in the shape of a Christmas tree. She would attach the word to the signs she'd already painted, replacing the word "Fresh" so that it read "Jazzy's TRADITIONAL Christmas Trees." Like Rose would say, it was a start.

She updated her website to emphasize the traditional and gay friendly aspects of the lot, worried briefly that the two concepts might conflict, shrugged, and added to her keywords to increase the likelihood that she'd get hits. She checked the traffic to the site and saw that three people had viewed it so far. One was from New Jersey, one from Australia, and one from Spokane. Well, at least one local person was interested.

By four o'clock she had turned her attention to her other idea. Darcy's Christmas tree lot gave away a free candy cane with the purchase of each tree. Jasmine thought she could do better. They had received a tin box of Christmas ribbon candy on Thanksgiving from Dilly's mom. Jasmine opened the box and spread the colorful ribbon candy out on the table. She moved pieces around, broke bits off here and there, and arranged them to make some sort of design. She looked on-line for a recipe for edible glue and found one used for making gingerbread houses. She whipped up a batch, divided it into four bowls, tinted three of them with food coloring, left the fourth clear, and went to work.

By eight-thirty, the table was filled with Christmas tree ornaments made out of ribbon candy, most of them already dry and with ornament hooks attached. She'd started with simple snowflake shapes, which were easy to make and beautiful with the vibrantly colored striped and curled patterns she'd chosen. She'd moved on to candy snowmen with licorice top hats and whimsical faces and was experimenting with a green and white striped tree when Rose walked in.

"Oh my God, Jazz, these are beautiful!"

Jasmine looked up, tired but happy. "Thanks. They turned out pretty well, didn't they?"

"How long have you been up?"

Jasmine glanced at the clock. "A little over five hours. I want to give one away with each tree. Like a candy cane, but better."

"These are way better than a candy cane." Rose lifted a snowflake by its string and spun it so she could see it from all directions. "You should just sell these instead of the trees."

Jasmine laughed. "They're not that great. Anyone could make them. Now I just have to figure out how to package them. They're kind of fragile."

"In Christmas ornament boxes," Rose said. "We have loads of them downstairs."

"Our ornaments are in those. What do we do with them?"

"Put them on our tree."

"We don't have a tree."

"We will tonight," Rose said. "It's Thanksgiving weekend. We always put up our tree on Thanksgiving weekend. It's tradition."

Jasmine had thought of waiting until Christmas Eve to put up a tree this year, since they'd be working every day until then anyway, but she immediately gave up the idea. When Rose played the tradition card, the discussion was over.

“Leave the ornaments to me,” Rose said. “I’ll get them packaged. You just need to make a sign that says ‘Free ornament with purchase of tree’ or something like that. And take a shower and get dressed.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

COLLEEN SHOWED UP at the lot promptly at ten and brought with her a five gallon stainless steel electric hot water dispenser, a box of instant hot chocolate, paper cups, stir sticks, napkins, and an extra folding table.

“I can’t stand hot chocolate myself, but you have to give these people something,” she said.

“Look what Jazz made.” Rose held up a candy snowman.

“Oh my God, that’s adorable,” Colleen said. “Can you eat it?”

“Of course,” Jasmine said. “That’s the whole point. Where can we get water for the hot chocolate?”

“You can’t let people eat them,” Rose protested. “They’re works of art.”

“It’s candy,” Jasmine said. “If I wanted to make art, I wouldn’t have made them with candy.”

“There must be water somewhere,” Colleen said. “Where does SleepSafe get water for their cider?”

“Who?” Jasmine asked.

“SleepSafe,” Colleen said. “You know, the other lot. SleepSafe Youth’s Christmas Tree lot, that organization for homeless kids.”

Jasmine’s heart sank. “You mean Darcy’s lot is a charity?”

“SleepSafe Youth is,” Colleen said, “but there’s a company that started it. SleepSafe Security, I think.”

The bubble of optimism Jasmine had been nurturing all morning popped. She dropped her head and tapped her forehead on the flimsy card table. “Crap, crap, crap.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Rose asked.

“Oh, nothing.” Jasmine couldn’t remember exactly what she’d said to Darcy the day before, but it was something about her crass commercialization of Christmas in order to make money.

“Don’t worry about it,” Colleen said. “Sure, some people like to support charities, but people who like quality Christmas trees will still come here.”

“Yeah,” Jasmine said, as if that was the only problem. “Or people who like a gay-friendly traditional Christmas tree lot.”

“Or people who like your ornaments,” Rose said.

The day promised better. Colleen wore comfortable shoes and practical gloves, and when Dilly finally showed up he wore jeans loose enough to allow him to bend. Several people stopped at the lot that morning, though Jasmine suspected most of them simply browsed before heading down the block to SleepSafe. Rose, who was too shy to ask people to buy trees, had no problem at all showing off the ornaments her sister had made.

“They’re *free*,” she emphasized, implying with genuine feeling that they’d have to be crazy not to take them up on the offer. A few of them did, and “Jazzy’s TRADITIONAL Christmas Trees” sold as many trees by early afternoon as they had all day the day before.

“We’ve got almost four hundred dollars today already,” Rose said, grinning and dancing on her toes.

Jasmine smiled but she was still concerned. The pace they were setting, though better than the day before, was still far from what they needed it to be in order to make a profit. Rose saw their coffers filling half full, but Jasmine saw them as still half empty. Meanwhile, traffic into the SleepSafe Christmas tree lot was heavy and steady. Worry tugged at her gut. "Maybe we should make popcorn balls," she said.

"Ooh, yes!" Dilly clapped his hands. "Red and green ones, with prizes inside, like Cracker Jack."

"Popcorn balls?" Rose made a face like a disappointed kid on Halloween. "Nobody likes popcorn balls. Besides, who has time to make them? I go back to school on Monday, you know, and Jazz needs to make more ornaments. We're down to five already."

Jasmine laughed. "Listen to her crack that whip."

"Yes, and I mean it," Rose said. "You can't stop making them now. People really like them, and I swear we sold at least three trees today because of them."

"I can't make popcorn balls," Colleen said. "I tried once and it turned into a popcorn casserole. Besides, I work on Monday."

"I'll give it a try," Dilly said. "I don't work 'til Monday night. Do we have money in the budget for prizes, Jazz?"

"Uh..." They barely had money in the budget for popcorn.

"Prizes sound fun."

Jasmine looked up. Darcy stood at the entrance of the lot with a large box in her hands. Jasmine bit her lip and prayed that Darcy hadn't overheard their desperate attempts to get some of SleepSafe's business.

Rose smiled. "Hi Darcy."

"Hey, Rose." Darcy walked to the table and set her box on it. "Hello Jasmine. You changed your sign."

Jasmine didn't answer. She glanced at the box. It had a large SleepSafe Security label on its front.

Dilly extended a hand to Darcy. "Don't mind her. She was raised in a barn. I'm Dylan Wilson. My friends call me Dilly."

Darcy's brows rose. "Dilly Wil—"

"Yes, okay, sometimes they call me Dilly Willy, but only if we're close, you know?"

Darcy laughed. "I think I do."

"And I'm Colleen. You're a friend of Jasmine's?"

"I'm the competition," Darcy said, and added with a half smile, "Two port-a-potties?"

"Oh, SleepSafe," Colleen said.

"That homeless shelter for kids?" Dilly asked. "Cool."

"Yes. It's also the name of my security company." Darcy tapped the label on the box with her finger.

"What's in the box?" Rose asked.

"It's a motion-sensing flood light," Darcy said. "I thought I'd set it up on one of your poles, if it's okay. You don't have to turn it on until you leave at night. It won't ruin your sparkle effect," she told Jasmine, "but if someone did climb over your fence, the light would go on. It should be enough to scare an intruder away."

Jasmine had read the top of the box while the others were getting acquainted, so she already knew what it was. She surreptitiously tried to spot a price on the box, without success. A motion-sensing light was a good idea, but she doubted she could afford it.

“It’s just a loan, of course,” Darcy said.

Jasmine looked up, met Darcy’s eyes, and realized she must have read her thoughts. Jasmine looked back at the box, grateful that her skin was too dark to reveal her hot cheeks. When had she become so transparent?

“Wow, thanks,” Rose said, when Jasmine didn’t. “That’s a great idea. Where should we put it?”

Darcy looked up at the bulb-less light pole in the corner of the lot. “Up there would be best. Do you have a ladder?”

“I have a stepladder in the bus,” Dilly said, and took off to the back of the lot.

“What’s that?” Darcy asked, pointing to the object dangling from Rose’s hand.

“It’s an ornament.” Rose handed it by its string to Darcy. “Jasmine made them.”

Darcy held up the snowflake and turned it. “It’s beautiful. Do you sell these?”

“No, they’re free if you buy a tree,” Rose said.

“Almost makes me want to buy a tree,” Darcy said. She gently laid the ornament on the table.

Rose grinned. “That’s the idea.”

“How do you get water for your cider?” Colleen asked.

“I have a tank in the RV. Do you need some water?”

“Yeah.” Colleen waved a hand at the hot water dispenser. “We have chocolate, but no water.”

“Bring it over,” Darcy said. “You can fill it up while I get a real ladder.”

Jasmine hopped up. “I’ll do it,” she said, speaking for the first time. She grabbed the hot water dispenser and headed for the street. Darcy followed and joined her on the sidewalk.

They walked in silence for a moment until Darcy said, “You want me to carry that for you?”

Instead of answering Darcy’s question, Jasmine asked her own. “Why are you doing all this?”

“All what? Loaning you a light?”

“Loaning me a deluxe two-head motion sensor light, brand new and still in the box,” Jasmine said. “And checking our fencing last night and giving us water and loaning us a ladder.”

“And installing the light,” Darcy added. “I’m not letting anyone else install it.”

Jasmine stopped and faced Darcy, forcing Darcy to stop as well. They were close, less than a foot apart, and Jasmine had to look up. Darcy was taller than she’d thought, perhaps six inches taller than Jasmine’s five two. She wore no baseball cap this time, but her light brown hair was still pulled back in a loose ponytail. A few fine strands escaped and waved in the breeze.

“So why are you doing it?” Jasmine asked. “We’re the competition, remember? Or don’t you think we are any competition?”

“Of course I think you’re competition,” Darcy said. Her expression was kind. “But that doesn’t mean I want anything bad to happen to you. I think you’re new at this, and you’re young, and you seem to be pretty much alone in this thing. To tell you the truth, I’m kind of worried about you.”

Great. After all her weeks—no, months—of research into the business of selling Christmas trees, this was the impression she gave? An incompetent youngster? She examined Darcy, from her ponytailed head to the sneakers on her feet, and said, “You can’t be much older than me.”

“I’m thirty-three,” Darcy said.

“And you started selling trees four years ago? You would have been twenty-nine. That’s only four years older than me.”

“I also had a master’s degree in business from U-Dub,” Darcy said almost gently, as if trying to ease the brunt of the news.

“Well, I have half a degree in fine arts from the Art Institute of Chicago,” Jasmine said, turning to walk again. “And I happen to believe that selling Christmas trees is as much an art as it is a business.”

“You’re probably right,” Darcy said, catching up. “You definitely have a lot more going on in that department than I do. Those ornaments are great, and your signs are, well, a step up from this.”

They had reached the SleepSafe lot. The electronic sign flashed GIFTS GALORE! at them as they stepped over the orange extension cord.

Jasmine stopped, frowned, and faced Darcy again. “You confuse me.”

Darcy laughed softly. “Well, that makes two of us.”

Chapter Four

DARCY HAD WESLEY take Jasmine into the RV for water while she hunted down the ladder. She was carrying it to the van when Caitlin approached, her face stormy.

“Darcy, Wes took that bitch from the other lot into the RV.”

“I know,” Darcy said. “She needs some water, and don’t call her that.”

“Why the hell not? If it walks like a bitch and talks like a bitch, it’s a bitch.”

“Caitlin, stop it,” Darcy said, trying not to laugh. “People don’t want to hear that kind of language in a Christmas tree lot. Besides...” Darcy almost said *I like her*, but she hesitated.

She knew Caitlin had a crush on her. Caitlin wasn’t subtle about it. She volunteered for any job that would let her work near Darcy and followed her around when she couldn’t. She hinted almost daily that she’d like to visit Darcy’s home, and she’d asked more than once if Darcy had a girlfriend. Darcy kept her responses vague. She didn’t like the kids to know too much about her personal life. She opened the back of the van and slid the ladder in over the top of the seats.

“Besides what?” Caitlin asked.

“It’s not professional,” Darcy said.

Caitlin put her hands on her hips, narrowed her eyes, and seemed about to argue, but just then Jasmine and Wesley rounded the corner of the RV with the filled five-gallon dispenser between them, each gripping a handle and trying not to bump it with their knees as they walked.

Darcy rushed forward. “Let me help you.”

“We got it,” Jasmine said, her teeth clenched with the effort.

They did, though barely, so Darcy hurried back to the van and opened the rear doors again. “We’ll drive back,” she said. “It’s too heavy to carry a whole block, and we have the ladder too. Here.” There was no way they could lift the dispenser to the floor of the van from their angle, so Darcy got behind them, bent, and lifted it from the bottom.

“Oof!” Wesley said when they finally got it stowed. “That was heavy. You’re pretty strong for a girl.”

“Thanks.” Jasmine smiled at Wesley and rubbed at the red marks left on her fingers from the handle. “You’re pretty strong for a boy.”

“Don’t call him that,” Caitlin said, her face still stormy. “He’s eighteen, and he’s a hell of a lot stronger than you, I bet.”

Wesley’s brows rose. “Chill, Cait. She’s just teasing.”

Darcy opened the passenger door and Caitlin stepped forward.

“I’ll come with you.”

“No,” Darcy said. “Jasmine’s coming with me.”

“That’s all right,” Jasmine said. “She can go with you. I’ll walk.”

“No.” Darcy shot Caitlin a stern glance and waved Jasmine forward. “Caitlin has work to do here.”

Caitlin huffed. Jasmine gave her a wary look, but she climbed into the van. Darcy got in on the other side, started the engine, and inched out of the lot. They were only going around the block, but she had to drive slowly to make sure the water didn't fall over.

"What's her problem?" Jasmine asked.

"Caitlin? Oh, she's all right," Darcy said. "She's got a little grudge against you, I think, from yesterday."

"Oh." Jasmine bit her lip. "Sorry about that."

"She'll get over it," Darcy said. "So tell me, why do you only have half a degree in fine arts? The Art Institute of Chicago is a pretty prestigious place, isn't it? It must have been hard to give up."

Jasmine looked out the window and shrugged. "It's just a school."

Talking to Jasmine was like trying to find her way out of a corn maze, Darcy thought. She hit a wall with every turn. But Darcy was very good at finding her way out of corn mazes. The trick was not to give up.

"Come on, what's the story? Why'd you quit school? Or were you kicked out? Boyfriends in your room after curfew? Was that it?"

Darcy glanced at Jasmine. She'd turned from the window and met Darcy's eyes with a slight, knowing smile. "No boyfriends," she said.

Darcy smiled too. "That's what I thought." She navigated the first turn. "So what did happen?"

Jasmine turned back to the window. "Our mom died," she said. "Rose needed someone to take care of her, so I quit school and came home."

Darcy hadn't expected that. "I'm sorry," she said. "No dad?"

"We have dads. Mine's a cliché, a black man in prison for dealing drugs." Her voice was cool and expressionless. "Rose's dad is white, and alcohol is his drug of choice, so he's managed to avoid prison so far. Other than that they're basically the same." She smiled slightly, but with no humor. "Mom didn't have great judgment when it came to men."

"I'm sorry," Darcy said again. "How long ago did your mom die?"

"Six years. Rose was eleven. She lived with her dad at first, but it was a bad situation. So I took her, and he didn't fight me for her. It's been just the two of us since then."

Darcy had sensed that Jasmine didn't have much support, but she was more alone than Darcy had realized. She wanted to say the right thing, but still hadn't thought of it when she pulled into Jasmine's driveway. Jasmine jumped out as soon as the truck stopped.

Darcy enlisted Dilly's help in installing the security light. She worked on the ladder while Dilly handed her tools. He chattered practically non-stop and seemed content when Darcy just said, "Uh huh," and nodded now and then. Darcy devoted her attention to the task and to watching Jasmine, Rose, and Colleen deal with the customers who came in. There weren't very many, and most of them left empty-handed. Some of them drove right down the street to SleepSafe.

From her perch on the ladder, Darcy could see SleepSafe's busy lot. It was a bustling metropolis compared to Jasmine's quiet forest of trees. It was apparent which lot was making money, which was gratifying, but Darcy found that she preferred the peacefulness of Jasmine's lot.

Watching Jasmine was pleasant too. She was small, athletic, and full of energy. She sold two trees while Darcy watched. Unlike the woman from the night before, these customers helped

load their own trees, but Darcy noticed Jasmine didn't seem to have any trouble helping them haul and lift them. She was strong for her size. She must have just been tired last night.

It had been a long time since Darcy was as drawn to a woman as she was to Jasmine. She was different than the women Darcy usually dated. She was young, she was black, partly anyway, and she didn't seem to have a flirtatious bone in her body. She had a chip on her shoulder that promised nothing but trouble if Darcy had the nerve to knock it off. Still, Darcy was tempted.

Few women were as successful in business as Darcy Gabriel, fewer still at such a young age, and she had done it all without the support of family. She hadn't made it as far as she had in life by taking foolish chances, but she wasn't afraid to take risks either. She weighed the possible consequences of her decisions against potential benefits, determined how much she could afford to lose, and made a logical decision before taking a chance. Partly by skill and partly by instinct, she rarely made a bad choice.

She tried to apply her business acumen to Jasmine, but she couldn't get past the first step. The possible consequences were easy and dire: rejection, betrayal, a broken heart. The possible benefits were unquantifiable. They were nothing she could tally on a spreadsheet, but they made Darcy's heart race. She wanted Jasmine to smile at her. She wanted to touch her face. She wanted to be near.

She realized Dilly had stopped talking. She looked down. He was watching her, must have been watching her, as she watched Jasmine move about the lot. He smiled, and she blushed. She gave a last turn to the bracket screw that held the light in place and climbed down.

"I think that's it," she said. "We won't know until later if it works, but 99 percent of the time, there's no problem."

"Good luck with that," Dilly said with a sly smile, and Darcy thought he wasn't talking about the light.

Chapter Five

IT RAINED HARD that night. The skies had cleared by the time they opened for business, but the ground was sloppy with mud. Rose had the foresight to wear boots, but Jasmine had been too busy that morning to bother looking at the weather, and by ten-thirty her sneakers were blocks of thick mud.

She didn't have time to work on the ornaments at home, not without giving up sleep, so she decided to set up a workshop at the lot. That morning she packed up parchment paper, pliers, tweezers, needles, jars of candy glue in various colors, and a pile of clean rags. She emptied the triple-decker fishing tackle box she usually used for holding beads and filled it with candy. Ribbon candy, she decided, would be her signature candy. Other candies could be used as well, but each ornament would have to primarily consist of ribbon candy. Colleen loaned her a fondue pot for keeping the candy glue liquid in the cold air.

It was a good thing she had something to keep her occupied, because few customers were hardy enough to tromp through the mud to look at trees, and business was slow. Her ornament workshop proved entertaining for the few customers who did show up, especially the children who all felt a need to dip a finger in the edible glue. They managed to sell a few trees. Too few. If only all that rain had been snow, they would have had six inches or more. People loved to shop for Christmas trees in the snow, and it made everything festive and bright.

Jasmine was worried. She hadn't yet confessed to Rose that she'd used her tiny college savings account to fund the business. In retrospect, it was one of the worst decisions she'd ever made. Losing money was one thing, but if Rose didn't get to go to a good college because Jasmine wasted her money on this stupid Christmas tree venture, she would never forgive herself.

Making candy ornaments was not high art, but if that's what it took to sell trees, Jasmine would make candy ornaments day and night until New Year's.

People did seem to like them. One woman even showed up that day solely because she'd seen one of Jasmine's candy snowflakes on her sister's tree and she wanted one like it. Rose wouldn't let her have one unless she bought a tree first, and she made the sale.

Jasmine glued one last piece of candy to Santa's beard and examined the finished product. His face was made of peppermint bark, his nose was an actual dried cherry, and his eyes were raisins with tiny bits of silver candy balls in the center. It took some doing to get the silver bits just the right size and shape to make the eyes twinkle, but she'd done it. White ribbon candy created a curly beard, and his hat was made with miniature candy canes.

Jasmine smiled. He was cute. She set the Santa face aside to dry and pulled her fishing tackle box onto her lap.

"Going fishing?"

The voice had become familiar already, and Jasmine felt her pulse speed up even before she looked up and saw Darcy walking onto the lot. She was smiling, but the smile faltered as she stopped and looked at the ground. Jasmine followed her gaze.

Darcy wore light brown work boots, almost golden in color, and until she'd stepped onto Jasmine's lot they'd been pristine. Now the toes and sides were marked with dark brown mud.

Jasmine rolled her eyes. "Didn't it rain at your place?"

"Of course it did," Darcy said, "but the water ran off." She stepped forward two steps before abandoning the attempt to keep her boots clean. She strode to the pole where the security light was mounted and lifted the cord, which dangled unplugged. "It's light sensitive," she said, waving the plug at Jasmine, "but it's not magic."

"I had to unplug it," Jasmine said. "That light turned on at 4:30 yesterday."

"Yeah, that's when it got dark."

"It spoiled my lighting," Jasmine said. "I meant to plug it in when I left, but I forgot."

Darcy let the cord drop. "Tomorrow I'll bring you a timer. You can set it to turn on when you leave."

Jasmine gave her a look.

"Just on loan, of course," Darcy added. She glanced around. "Where's Rose?"

"She went home to get her wagon."

"Her wagon? What kind of wagon?"

"You know, a little red wagon, like kids have? Rose's is still in our garage." Jasmine stirred the candies in the yellow compartment of the fish tackle box, but without any intent. "We're almost out of water. If it's okay with you, she thought she could bring the dispenser to your place, fill it, and haul it back in the wagon."

"Sure," Darcy said. "Or you could bring it. I don't mind driving it over, though."

Jasmine moved her finger from the yellow candies to the blue.

"I could give you a call tonight to remind you to plug in the light," Darcy said.

Their eyes met again. It was an obvious ploy to get Jasmine's phone number, and Jasmine wasn't surprised by it. She'd have to be stupid to not realize Darcy was interested in her, and she wasn't stupid. What did surprise her was her own hesitation. She expected herself to say no. She always said no. She opened her mouth to say it, but the word didn't come out.

She was intrigued by Darcy. Intrigued, but leery. She was leery of everyone. She'd only had one girlfriend, and it had ended badly. It was just a stupid college heartbreak, the kind everyone goes through, but it hurt and it had reinforced the distrust that had already become ingrained in her by then. She hadn't dated since. Anyway, she had no time for girlfriends after that. She had to focus on Rose. Everything was about Rose.

Darcy smiled at her hesitation. Her eyes crinkled at the corners as if she was inviting Jasmine in. "The light won't turn on if it's not plugged in."

Jasmine gave her the number.

She deliberately did not plug in the security light that night. She sent Rose home early with Colleen and kept her cell phone handy. When the phone rang at 8:45, she grabbed it and wandered into the trees.

"I don't see any light on over there," Darcy said without saying hello.

Jasmine was startled at the rush of blood through her veins at the sound of Darcy's voice. "Are you spying on me?" she asked.

"No, I'm just stalking you," Darcy said. "Spying implies stealth. I'm not that sneaky."

Jasmine smiled in the dark. It was easier on the phone. There was no one to see. "Good to know. It'll help when I file the police report."

"Yeah." Jasmine could hear the smile in Darcy's voice. "That's Darcy Gabriel, G A B R I E L. Like the Angel. Five foot eight, a hundred and sixty pounds, gray eyes."

“More green than gray, I think,” Jasmine said.

Her words were met with a silence that made her heart pound. She probably shouldn’t have said that.

“You noticed my eyes?” Darcy finally asked.

Instead of answering, Jasmine bent down, picked up the cord for the security light, and plugged it in.

Darcy gave a soft laugh. “Atta girl.”

“Good Lord, where are you? You are stalking me.”

“Just a little,” Darcy said. “I’ll bring you the timer tomorrow.” She hung up.

But Darcy didn’t bring the timer on Monday. Instead she sent the girl, Caitlin, the one with the bejeweled cheeks who couldn’t seem to forgive Jasmine for challenging her that first day at the cash register. She marched up to the card table where Jasmine was trying to design a reindeer and slammed a small box onto the table. Chocolate pretzel reindeer horns jumped and scattered.

“Darcy said to give you this,” Caitlin said.

“Oh. Thank you.” Jasmine reached for the box, but Caitlin picked it up again and held it out of reach. She looked at the candy pieces spread across the table and asked, “What’s that?”

“I’m making ornaments,” Jasmine said. “I give one away with each tree.”

Caitlin rolled her eyes. “Lame.”

The girl was no child. She was older than Rose, Jasmine guessed, far too old to act like such a brat. Jasmine was tempted to tell her so but decided the girl probably already knew it. Her behavior was deliberate. Still, Jasmine may have started it with her treatment of Caitlin that first day.

“Look, I’m sorry we got off on the wrong foot,” Jasmine said. “I was upset that day, but not with you.”

Caitlin snorted. “I don’t give a shit about that.”

Jasmine had enough. She held out her hand. “Are you going to give me the timer, or not?”

Caitlin looked like she wanted to throw it, but instead she dropped it hard into Jasmine’s open palm. “Whatever.” She turned to leave. “This Christmas tree lot is boring.” She stalked out.

For some reason, the girl hated her, and it wasn’t just because of Jasmine’s behavior that day. It was an uncomfortable feeling, but after a moment Jasmine’s concern switched to wondering why Darcy hadn’t brought the timer herself. Had Jasmine’s comment about her eyes crossed a line? She’d thought Darcy was flirting with her, but maybe she’d misread the conversation. She was out of practice, after all.

No, she’d never even been in practice. Her college girlfriend was intense and serious, but she didn’t flirt. Jasmine didn’t flirt. What did she know about flirting? Yes, she’d almost certainly misread Darcy and probably offended her to boot.

It was for the best, she supposed. She didn’t need a girlfriend. She needed to focus on Rose.

No matter how compelling Darcy’s green eyes were.

Chapter Six

SECURITY WORK WAS nighttime work. That's the time when people set their alarms and hired security patrols to cruise their neighborhoods. Darcy's company had grown to the point that she rarely had to respond to alarms or run the patrols herself. Now she generally only worked during the day promoting the business and doing personnel work or accounts.

Unless someone quit unexpectedly. It happened more often than she liked. She paid her employees well, but it was still the night shift. When opportunities for day work came up, people jumped at them. Usually they were responsible enough to give her a two-week notice so she could hire and train a replacement. Not this time. Craig left with no warning, just a note that he was moving back to Idaho with an address so she could forward his last check.

If it were another time of year, she would have had substitute patrols available, or she could have let the office work slide. But it was mid-December, one of the busiest times of the year, and she was already using all the subs she had. So here she was taking on a night shift on top of her management duties.

Days were the shortest they would be, with twice as many dark hours as light, and the media reported every year about this time of thieves breaking in and stealing Christmas presents. It made people skittish and more willing to spend some of their Christmas cash on a new security system. Some of them even bought security systems as Christmas gifts for family or friends. Darcy wasn't the only one who believed that providing security for loved ones was the ultimate romantic gesture.

She was pretty sure it was just a coincidence that she had that last thought as she drove past "Jazzy's TRADITIONAL Christmas Trees." The lot was silent, empty and dark, even with Jasmine's twinkle lights flickering.

Darcy had been too busy all week working or sleeping to drive by during the day when Jasmine would be there. She'd even had to ask Wesley to deliver the light timer to Jasmine. Darcy had seen nothing of Jasmine since Sunday, and it was driving her crazy.

She had Jasmine's phone number in her phone. She could call her. She almost did once, and had pushed six of the seven buttons when she realized it was the middle of the night. She should never have given her that timer, Darcy realized. It robbed her of a bona fide reason for calling every night.

She drove beyond Jasmine's lot to SleepSafe's. It was lit up like, well, like a Christmas tree. The lights were on in the RV, and flashes from a television screen flickered on the curtains. It wasn't just for show. She had Fabio, one of her junior security guards, staying in it until Christmas. They had too much portable merchandise on the lot to leave the place unguarded.

Darcy rounded the corner to circle Jasmine's lot one more time, like she did every night, and wondered if she was building Jasmine up to be something she wasn't. She barely knew her, after all, and she hadn't seen her for four days. Was she really as cute as Darcy remembered? Probably not. She probably had greasy skin and dirty fingernails. What if she was one of those girls that made a train wreck look tidy? She'd certainly bitten off more than she could chew with

that Christmas tree lot. She didn't have a clue what she was doing. If that was how she ran her life, it was probably a mess.

Darcy was a good judge of character, even when she had nothing to base it on but a first impression. She had to be in her business. But she worried that her judgment might have deserted her this time. She couldn't remember if Jasmine's fingernails were dirty or painted or bitten or if she had any at all. All she could remember were Jasmine's solemn dark eyes that watched her so carefully, her full lips, and those dimples that showed in her cheeks even when she frowned, which was far too often.

Maybe Darcy should run a background check on her. She bit her lip. No, that would be wrong.

Friends are a good indicator of a person's personality though, and Dilly and Colleen seemed all right. Even more important, Rose was a smart, healthy, sweet, normal teenage girl. If Jasmine was raising her, they both had to be doing something right.

Not that any of it mattered. The truth was, Jasmine was already under Darcy's skin, whether she had dirty fingernails or not. Darcy was smitten, and there was nothing she could do about it.

Chapter Seven

THE WEATHER REMAINED mild most of the week. Business picked up slowly, but they sold enough trees so that on Friday Jasmine could afford to pay everyone except herself. Most of their sales were made in the evening. Business during the day was slowest, which was probably a good thing, since Jasmine had no helpers until Rose got out of school. Jasmine was able to create an entire inventory of ornaments at her makeshift workshop. She started dressing her snowmen in lettermen jackets representing the local high schools, purple and gold for Rogers, green and yellow for Shadle, and blue and white for Gonzaga. She used a rolling pin to crush the ribbon candy into tiny pieces that she sprinkled on the sugar glue like it was glitter.

People liked them. After each sale of a tree, Rose or Jasmine would spread an assortment of ornaments across the table. The customers would smile, their eyes would light up, they would finger one ornament and then another, dither between the two, and ask if they could buy an extra without the purchase of a second tree. Jasmine was willing to let them, but Rose was adamant. One ornament per tree and no more.

Every day after school Rose examined the new ornaments Jasmine had made and checked to see which ornaments had gone off the lot with customers. She knew exactly how many there should be at all times, so Jasmine didn't dare bend the one-ornament rule during the day when Rose wasn't there.

Jasmine had to admit there might be something to Rose's strategy. Three times that week, customers came in to buy trees only because they'd seen the ornaments a previous customer had brought home. Two bought trees on the spot, and a third promised to buy one if Jasmine made him a snowman in crimson and gray, the colors for WSU. Those customers probably wouldn't have bought their trees from Jasmine's lot if it weren't for the ornaments.

Still, sales were slow. The website Jasmine had designed had hardly any hits and no orders at all. It turned out people who wanted live trees liked to pick them out in person, not on-line. The gay-friendly angle didn't bring in much business either, aside from that first day. A disproportionate number of street kids were gay, Jasmine learned. They were kids who found themselves homeless because they were unwelcome in their own homes, and many of Dilly's friends chose to buy their trees from SleepSafe to help support the shelter for that reason. She couldn't blame them, but she worried.

Toward the end of the week, the weather grew colder and the wind picked up, creating a bitter wind chill. Jasmine wore fingerless gloves when she worked on the ornaments, but she still had to stop every few minutes to stomp around and stick her hands into her armpits to warm them up. The forecasters promised it would get colder before it got warmer, some of them predicting single digit temperatures in their ten-day forecasts. The forecasts were usually wrong, Jasmine knew, but again, she worried.

All the Christmas tree farms recommended a shed on the lot, or at least a lean-to, to protect cut trees from the weather. Freezing temperatures would not harm the trees, but the cold wind could dry them out prematurely. Besides, people resisted buying frozen trees. They liked to test

the freshness by touching the branches, and they liked to pinch the needles to release the scent. Treatment like that on a frozen tree would be fruitless and it could cause the branches to snap or needles to fall off, no matter how healthy the tree. Keeping trees in even an unheated shed would keep them supple and attractive to buyers, but after renting the lot and buying the trees, Jasmine had no money left for sheds or lean-tos. She'd looked at the weather patterns for the last three years, saw that it didn't get really cold until January, and she'd gambled.

Just in case the forecasters were right, though, she stopped at Costco on her way to the lot on Friday morning and invested in a double pack of large heavy-duty tarps. She could at least cover the trees that were still netted and protect them from the worst of the wind and cold. The trees on display would have to take their chances.

She didn't try to tackle the task of covering the trees by herself, and it was evening before Rose arrived to help her. Colleen had to work, and it was date night for Dilly, which meant he was still home primping.

The tarps were twelve feet by sixteen. Jasmine gave Rose one end, and she took the other, unfolding it as she walked backward.

"This thing is huge," Rose said.

"But still not big enough," Jasmine said as the tarp ended before she reached the end of the pile of trees. "We're going to have to bungee two of them together. Hey!"

The wind swept beneath the tarp, yanked it out of Rose's hand, and flung it into the air like a blue sail. Jasmine tried to hold on to her end, but her fingers were too frozen to grip it tightly enough. The tarp ripped from her hands, sailed up, and would have flown away if it hadn't been caught in the web of twinkle lights.

"Stop it!" Jasmine shouted. She jumped and tried to grab the tarp, but it was too high. "Quick, before it takes out the lights."

Rose ran to the table, grabbed the folding chair, and hurried back. She climbed on the chair but still could not reach the tarp. She gave a little jump.

"Don't jump on that, Rose," Jasmine said. "You'll fall. Get down. I'll do it."

"That doesn't make any sense. You'll have to jump too," Rose said, but she climbed down. "You're no taller than I am."

"I am too. I have at least two inches on you." Jasmine climbed onto the chair and gave a little jump. She nearly reached the tarp, but the wind whipped it away at the crucial moment. She jumped a little higher, missed again, and wobbled when she landed on the chair.

"Don't jump, Jazz!" Rose cried. "You're going to fall."

"I can't reach it otherwise," Jasmine said. She bent her knees to push off again, but stopped when she felt a hand on her arm. She turned and found herself looking into Darcy's green eyes. The chair wobbled again.

"Let me do it," Darcy said. "I'm taller than both of you."

"Oh, good," Rose said.

Jasmine remained frozen, half crouched, until Darcy tugged on her arm again. "Let me, Jasmine."

Just like she had that first night, Jasmine hopped from the chair and let Darcy climb up. Darcy easily reached the tarp without jumping. She grabbed a corner of it and yanked.

"Easy," Jasmine said. "Don't pull the lights down."

"I got it," Darcy said. She tugged at the tarp and untangled it from the strings of lights. The wind did not fight her. She pulled the last of the tarp down and stepped to the ground.

Jasmine glanced around the lot and saw that the wind had completely died. She turned back to Darcy. "How do you do that?"

"Do what?"

Jasmine shook her head. The fog frosted Darcy's trees, and then the clouds parted so the sun could make them sparkle. The rain didn't turn her lot to mud, and now the wind died when she appeared. Coincidence, that's all it was. Nobody could control the weather. "Nothing."

"Will you help us cover the trees?" Rose asked. "It'll be easier with three of us."

"Sure," Darcy said. She grabbed one end of the tarp and hauled it toward the pile of bound trees. "These trees? You sure it's big enough?"

"It's not," Jasmine said. "We need to bungee two of them together."

"I'll get the bungee cords," Rose said. She turned and ran to the street where the car was parked.

Jasmine and Darcy stood in the silent, suddenly windless, night. Jasmine wanted to ask Darcy where she'd been all week and was just gathering the nerve to do so when Darcy spoke.

"I love bungee cords," Darcy said.

Jasmine laughed. "Why?"

"I don't know. There's something so...bungee about them."

"Yeah," Jasmine nodded as if Darcy had said something profound. "I haven't seen you around much this week."

"No. One of my security guards quit. I've been pulling extra shifts."

"Oh."

"It's nice to know I was missed."

Jasmine looked in the direction of the car and didn't answer.

"I see you got the timer all right," Darcy said.

"Yes, thanks," Jasmine said, "but did you have to send Scarface with it?"

"Scarface?"

Jasmine tapped her cheek in the spots where Caitlin's jewels were embedded.

Darcy laughed, then stopped herself as if knowing she shouldn't. "I asked Wesley to bring it."

"Well, he didn't. She did. She doesn't like me."

"Yeah, she can be a brat."

Rose ran up, breathless and pink, with a plastic bag in her hand. "Sorry. I couldn't find them. I forgot we put them in the trunk."

They latched the tarps together and draped the combined tarps over the trees. The trees were stacked in a corner, so they were able to bungee three corners of the tarp directly to the fence. Rose was right, it was much easier with three people, especially since the wind had died down.

"What can we attach this to?" Rose asked, holding onto the fourth corner. "It needs something heavy to hold it down."

Just then Dilly's bus pulled into the lot and stopped beside them.

"Hey Dilly," Jasmine called as soon as he opened his door. "Will you leave your bus here to hold down this last corner?"

"Ha ha," Dilly said, climbing out.

"Is this a camper bus?" Darcy asked.

"It's a love-mobile," Dilly said, "and it goes wherever I go."

"It's really cool inside," Rose told Darcy. "It has a fridge and a sink and a fold-out bed with a mattress."

“Which you are never to touch,” Jasmine said.

Dilly slid open the side door and Darcy leaned in to look. “Does it have a heater? When it’s not running, I mean?”

“Alas, no,” Dilly said. “It’s more of a spring-summer love-mobile.”

“Too bad,” Darcy said. “You could park it here at night and have someone stay here to guard the place.”

“Why?” Dilly asked. “Do we have a security problem?”

“Darcy’s all about security,” Jasmine said.

“It’s just better to be safe,” Darcy said.

“So, how’s business?” Dilly asked. “Have people flocked to buy trees since I brought the popcorn balls?”

“The popcorn pancakes, you mean?” Rose asked.

“That was not my fault,” Dilly said. “They didn’t harden fast enough. They still taste good.”

“Kids like candy better,” Rose said. “You should see the ornament Jazzy made for you. It’s a drag queen snowman.”

“Oh my God, I have to see that! Show me.”

Rose dropped the corner of the tarp, which lay obediently still on the ground, and she and Dilly headed for the tables. Jasmine started to follow.

“Jasmine wait,” Darcy said.

Jasmine stopped.

“Walk the perimeter with me?”

“The perimeter?” Jasmine asked. “Is that security talk?”

Darcy gave a little laugh. “Yeah, sorry. I mean, walk with me for a minute?” She turned in the direction of the standing trees.

Walking in the trees would remove them from Rose and Dilly’s line of sight. Jasmine could think of only one reason Darcy would ask her to do that. Her heart sped up. She opened her mouth to refuse, then bit her lip and followed Darcy.

Five steps in Darcy stopped and faced Jasmine. The trees cut off much of the sound of the traffic, and even Dilly and Rose’s voices seemed far away. It was almost like they were alone in the forest, their only illumination the twinkling lights above them.

“I’ve thought about you a lot this week,” Darcy said. Her eyes looked almost black.

“Yeah?” Jasmine asked, her voice higher than she liked.

“Yeah. I’ve been wondering how you were doing.” Darcy took Jasmine’s hand in hers and slowly brought it almost to her mouth, as if she was going to kiss it, and Jasmine’s heart thumped. Instead of kissing it, though, she examined Jasmine’s fingernails. Jasmine noticed her fingers, poking out of her fingerless gloves, were smudged with red and green food coloring, especially under the nails. She tried to pull her hand back, but Darcy held on and looked up, her expression stunned, like she’d just read her future there.

Jasmine’s heart pounded, and when Darcy lowered her head, slowly, her eyes fixed on Jasmine’s giving her plenty of notice of her intention, Jasmine couldn’t move. She took a quick intake of breath, closed her eyes, and let Darcy kiss her.

It was a short kiss, a soft kiss, a tender and sweet kiss. It was exactly the kind of kiss Jasmine needed after having had no kisses at all for the last four years. How did Darcy know to kiss her like that? She stared at her in wonder.

A tiny smile trembled on Darcy’s lips, and she lowered her head again to Jasmine’s.

Lights flashed through the trees as a car pulled into the lot, and Jasmine pulled away.

“Jasmine!” Rose called. “We have a customer.”

Customers might not be a big deal at the SleepSafe Christmas tree lot, but at “Jazzy’s TRADITIONAL Christmas Trees,” they were a big deal.

Jasmine took a step back. “I have to go,” she said.

Darcy nodded, and Jasmine left her standing in the trees.

Chapter Eight

OF ALL THE fingernails Darcy had imagined during her midnight security rounds, she'd never come close to imagining fingernails as adorable as those. Jasmine's fingers were slender, dainty even, and the nails were short and clear and plain except for the Christmas colors buried in the cuticles. Darcy suspected that, when Jasmine worked on other sorts of art, her nails were decorated with paint or clay or ink or whatever was the medium of the day. What a fun game it would be, she'd thought when staring at those fingers, to come home from work at night and guess what project Jasmine was working on by looking at her nails.

She saw forever together in Jasmine's fingers. The thought scared her at first, but then she'd looked up and seen Jasmine's eyes and she forgot about being scared.

That kiss.

Darcy had a girlfriend, sort of. They dated when they had time. Sierra was a lot of fun. She was a party girl. She liked dancing and drinking and sex. She was hot. Kissing Sierra was like taking a shot of Fireball whiskey. It went straight to Darcy's gut and made her do things that weren't always smart. Between dates, Darcy didn't think about Sierra much.

Darcy couldn't stop thinking about Jasmine.

And that kiss.

Kissing Jasmine was like sipping hot buttered rum. It warmed Darcy, gave her a tingle of joy that reached the tips of her fingers and toes, and left her licking her lips for more.

She looked around SleepSafe's RV. Fabio had left it a mess, but she didn't hire security guards for their tidiness. Besides, he never had a chance to try to clean it before leaving. For her own convenience, Darcy had made his promotion effective immediately. She didn't want to wait for background checks to clear on the new applicants. She didn't want another week of double shifts. Staying in the RV herself was a good trade-off.

The RV belonged to SleepSafe Security. In addition to monitoring the Christmas tree lot each year, it was used for long-term surveillance jobs. Darcy was not a detective and SleepSafe was not an investigation company, but it did take on jobs now and then when the only duty was to observe and report back. The RV was old and rundown, but it was sturdy and reliable and insulated. It was effective for roaming incognito through neighborhoods, but it was no love-mobile.

Darcy tried to see it through Jasmine's eyes. The swivel passenger chair that doubled as an easy chair was slouchy and stained, crumbs buried in its crevices, from so many meals having been eaten there. Crumbs littered the ancient carpet too, making Darcy's shoes crunch as she walked. Sticky layers of grime covered the toaster, the coffee maker, and the door handles of the microwave and refrigerator. The inside of the microwave looked like someone had exploded a tomato in it.

She had no time to clean, though, not today. She had no time to do more than change the sheets on the double bed and wipe a damp cloth over the sink and toilet before stepping out of the RV into chaos.

It was the third Saturday before Christmas, one of the busiest days for selling Christmas trees. While the kids could sell trees without assistance from her, only Darcy could arrange for and accept deliveries, manage banking, and settle customer emergencies. She was kept busy for several hours.

It was cold and getting colder. The sun shone, but the temperature was only expected to reach 12 degrees. The trees on display were already frozen and brittle, so Darcy directed customers into the shed that she kept heated to thirty-four degrees, and sales went on. It was too cold for the big kids to stand around at cash registers and popcorn carts, too cold for the little kids to stand around waiting for Santa. Too cold for Santa for that matter. She contacted Rental City, and by early afternoon they had delivered three outdoor propane heaters. Customers gathered around them, hands to the heat, and increased the festive atmosphere with their laughter and jokes about roasting chestnuts.

Darcy wondered what Jasmine was doing to withstand the cold. She didn't have a shed warmed to 34 degrees or a cozy RV to duck into to get warm, no matter how filthy it was, and Darcy suspected Jasmine didn't have the funds to rent propane heaters. It was nearly three o'clock before she was able to finally break away and head down the street to check on her.

She didn't know exactly what she'd expected to find at Jasmine's lot, but she had a vague idea that she'd find her sitting half frozen on her metal folding chair trying to glue pieces of candy together with trembling frostbitten fingers. Before she even rounded the corner, though, shrieks of laughter informed her of her error.

A half dozen customers danced wildly through trees with Jasmine and her crew, all of them laughing and singing, while Christmas music blared from the open windows of Dilly's bus. Two young men, probably friends of Dilly's, swung in each other's arms. Rose danced with a stout middle-aged woman while another woman danced with Dilly. Colleen swung a little girl about six years old in a dizzying circle, and Jasmine danced with a boy a couple of years older than the girl. A cloud of white from their frosty breaths followed them, and they all wore bright smiles and red cheeks and noses. Even Jasmine's dark cheeks had a rosy tinge.

Rose saw her first. "Darcy!" she cried. "Come dance with us. We're keeping warm!"

Jasmine looked up, met Darcy's eyes, and her smile widened. She held out a hand, and Darcy moved to her as if Jasmine had clutched her heart with her mittened hand and pulled. Maybe she had. Jasmine let the boy go and moved into Darcy's arms like they'd danced together all their lives.

Jasmine's jacket was thick and soft, and holding her was like holding a cloud, only better. "Jingle Bell Rock" played, and Darcy swung Jasmine in her arms, moving to the rhythm with no plan or thought. Jasmine followed, light on her feet, and laughed up at her, her eyes shining brighter than any twinkle lights ever could, and Darcy felt her soul soar. She wished the moment would never end. She felt she would do anything to get Jasmine to keep looking at her like that forever.

But the song ended, and the dancing stopped. "Okay, kids," one of the men called. "We're running out of time. Pick out your ornament and let's go."

Jasmine slipped out of Darcy's arms, and for the first time since entering the lot, Darcy felt cold.

The group gathered around the tables. Rose and Jasmine each lifted a Rubbermaid storage box from underneath to set on top.

"I want Rudolph!" the girl shouted.

"I want a football player," the boy said.

“I don’t have any football players,” Jasmine said. “I never made any.”

“You should,” the boy said.

“Football players aren’t very Christmassy,” one of his dads said.

“Yes they are. Football players play on Christmas all the time.”

“That’s true,” his other dad said.

“You have to pick from what’s here,” Rose said. “Here’s a reindeer.”

“That’s not Rudolph,” the girl said. “He doesn’t have a red nose.”

“I can put a red nose on him,” Jasmine said, “but not today. It’s too cold for the candy glue to work.”

“Can you put a football helmet on a snowman?” the boy asked.

“One ornament per tree,” Rose said. “No exceptions.”

Darcy stood behind the little family and marveled anew at the ornaments Jasmine had made. It amazed her that the woman she’d kissed the night before was able to create such beautiful designs just from candy. She wondered what else Jasmine could do. It seemed odd that she didn’t know. Jasmine was so familiar and yet she was a stranger at the same time.

The family finally decided on a reindeer and made plans to bring it back on a warmer day to have a red nose attached. The two older women, who apparently didn’t know any of the other dancers before their impromptu party, also decided to come back on a warmer day, claiming it was too cold to look at trees. They waved goodbye, piled in their cars, and the lot grew quiet.

“You have a lot of ornaments there,” Darcy said. “You made them all?”

“Yes,” Jasmine said. “It’s fun, but it’s too cold now. I need my fingers bare to touch the pieces, and they get numb almost as soon as I start.”

“Do you leave them here overnight?”

“No, we’ve been hauling them back and forth in the car every day,” Rose said. “It’s a pain in the butt.”

“I think they’d be all right if we left them here at night,” Jasmine said. “The boxes will keep them dry, and if we tuck them into the trees no one will see them.”

“If anyone climbs over the fence, they’ll find them,” Darcy said. “Thieves are like that. You should get a heater for your bus, Dilly. Someone should be spending the night here anyway. You could keep the boxes in the bus and have someone provide security at the same time.”

“Is that why you have that RV over there?” Rose asked. “Does someone sleep there?”

“I’ve had someone there ‘til today,” Darcy said. “Starting tonight it’s going to be me.”

“Really?” Jasmine cocked her head like a little bird. “You’re staying there overnight?”

“Yes. It’s heated and insulated.”

“Aren’t you scared?” Colleen asked.

“No,” Darcy said. “Security’s my job. Besides, people won’t bother with the trees if they know someone’s around.”

“It’s not the trees I’d be worried about,” Colleen said, hopping up and down with her hands stuck in her armpits.

“I wish it would snow,” Jasmine said. “People don’t feel the cold so much when it snows. They’re too happy.”

Now that Jasmine and her crew were standing instead of dancing, they looked pinched with cold. Darcy’s own fingers and toes, which had been plenty warm before, started to sting.

“It’s too cold for you guys to be out here all day with no heat,” she said.

“That’s what I keep telling her,” Colleen said. “Nobody wants to buy trees today anyway. You heard those ladies. It’s too cold.”

“Are you selling trees over at SleepSafe?” Jasmine asked.

“Yes,” Darcy said, “but we have heaters.”

“If you’re selling trees, then we’re selling trees,” Jasmine said. There was a smile in her eyes, but her face was determined.

“What kind of heaters?” Dilly asked.

“Propane,” Darcy said. “I rented them from Rental City.”

“How much?” Jasmine asked.

She should have said the heaters were her own, Darcy realized. She could have told Jasmine she had one she could loan. Still, it was worth a try.

“I have an extra one, if you’d like to use it,” she said.

Jasmine gave her a knowing look. “If it’s extra, send it back. We’ll rent our own heater if we decide we need one.”

“Bullshit,” Colleen said. “You can’t afford a heater. Use Darcy’s, if she’s willing to part with one.”

“It’ll attract customers,” Dilly said.

“And you’ll be able to work on ornaments again,” Rose added.

Jasmine’s eyes didn’t waver from Darcy’s as her cohorts pleaded their case. In a silent conversation, Jasmine challenged and Darcy pleaded. *Let me do this for you.* Jasmine blinked, and Darcy added her own argument to the pile. “It’s only going to get colder when the sun goes down,” she said softly.

Jasmine took a deep breath, bit her lip, and gave a slight nod. The gang cheered.

Chapter Nine

WHEN SOMETHING SEEMS too good to be true, it usually is. Jasmine learned that lesson long ago. She was four years old when she learned to distrust promises from her father. Promised gifts, promised visits, promised love, they never appeared. Later, when he went to prison and asked her to visit him, she was flattered. She had expected nothing from him during the visits except his attention, but she was still naïve enough to expect that. Instead, he complained to her at length about the prison food, the other prisoners, the guards, and the tiny wage he earned at his inmate job, from which ten percent was automatically deducted for Jasmine's long overdue child support. The only interest he showed in her life was to ask when she planned to get a job so she could send him money. She was eleven years old.

When her mother married again, to Rose's father, Jasmine thought things might be different, and for a while it was. He brought home hamburgers and milkshakes for dinner, took the girls to the local swimming pool, took the family on drives in the country, and camping once at Riverside State Park. Then he started drinking again. His promises grew bigger—horseback riding lessons, ski trips, Disneyland—and the disappointments mounted. He forgot to come to Jasmine's softball game, forgot to pick Rose up from daycare, forgot to buy groceries, forgot to bring home a paycheck, until finally he forgot to come home at all. They divorced. He still picked Rose up once every month or two for a visit, gave her presents for her birthday and Christmas, but he seemed to forget that Jasmine had ever been part of the family.

Their mother loved them deeply, but she was overworked and tired. She never made them any promises, so she didn't break any, but she couldn't be counted on to take care of them either. The only sure way to avoid disappointment, Jasmine knew, was to rely on no one but herself. And while she had been thrilled to find a girlfriend at college, she wasn't surprised when she was dumped before things even got started with her. She had never expected anything else. It had been too good to be true.

Darcy was too good to be true.

It wasn't just the kiss, though that was lovely. It wasn't that she kept doing things for Jasmine, loaning her equipment and setting it up for her, checking her security like she really cared, though those things were wonderful too.

It was the look in her eyes when they fixed on Jasmine, which was pretty much all the time they were together. Nearly every time Jasmine looked at Darcy, Darcy was staring back at her with eyes that glowed like she was watching fireworks for the first time. Her lips would part and her face would grow all soft like she couldn't believe what she was seeing.

It was hard not to respond to that sort of attention, and Jasmine found she didn't want to. She felt her own face soften when she looked at Darcy, and if she could see her own eyes, Jasmine suspected they might glow a bit too.

It was too good to be true, and it was bound to come crashing down when Darcy got to know her a little better. One kiss was all they had shared. They didn't really know each other at all. What would Darcy do when she learned Jasmine was filled to the brim with flaws? She'd never had a regular job and didn't really want one. She wasn't afraid of hard work, but she couldn't

bear to do stupid, meaningless jobs for someone else. She wanted to paint, more than anything, and she was filled with entrepreneurial schemes designed to give her time to do it. Most of her ideas flopped, though she really thought she'd picked a winner with the Christmas tree lot. She was a terrible housekeeper. She was distrustful with strangers, was hard to get to know, and had few friends, though those she had were good ones. Once Darcy learned all that about Jasmine, would her eyes still glow?

Besides, what did Jasmine really know about Darcy? She might be just as flawed as Jasmine. Sure, she was a successful businesswoman and a philanthropist, but other than that? Well, she was generous and sexy and kissed with magic, but other than that...other than that, Jasmine realized, it just didn't matter. The fact was, none of it mattered. She was hooked. She was like a moth pummeling itself against a hot light bulb. It would end in disaster. It was bound to, but she was helpless. She was drawn and there was nothing she could do about it.

So that night, after she'd sent Rose home early on the city bus, Jasmine turned off the propane heater like Darcy had showed her, made sure the security light was on and the gate was locked, and walked down the block to SleepSafe's lot. It was locked, of course. It was nine-thirty at night and the temperature was in the single digits. No one was buying Christmas trees. Lights were on in the RV. Jasmine bit the tip of her mitten and pulled it off so she could send a text on her phone.

U should check yr perimeter. Someone might be lurking out here.

???

Jasmine smiled and tapped some more.

Perimeter. It's a security word. Means fence.

She saw movement behind the window. A moment later the door to the RV opened. Darcy stood in the doorway with a giant flashlight in her hand. She swept it in an arc through the lot and stopped it at the fence where Jasmine stood.

"Jazz?"

Jasmine held up a hand to block the light.

"What are you doing here?" Darcy asked, moving forward. "It's, like, four degrees out here."

"I know," Jasmine said. "That's why I think you should hurry." Her voice shook. She hoped Darcy thought it was from the cold.

"Oh crap, the key." Darcy turned and ran back inside. A moment later she returned, this time with a jangle of keys in her hands. She hurried to the gate and unlocked it. "Come inside, quick."

Jasmine followed Darcy into the RV.

"Here, sit here." Darcy swiveled the front passenger seat so that it faced the living area of the RV and swiped a hand over the seat of it. "It's the most comfortable seat."

Jasmine sat. The chair was roomy, upholstered, and had arms.

Using quick movements, Darcy switched off the television that was mounted near the ceiling, snatched up an open bag of potato chips and stowed it in a cupboard, and used her sleeve to swipe crumbs off the fold-up table onto the floor. She stuffed the edge of a pink velour blanket onto the bench seat behind the table and sat beside it, slightly breathless, facing Jasmine. A can of Fresca was on the table. Darcy twirled it in her hands.

Darcy was nervous, Jasmine realized. It made her feel better. “Was that *The Muppets Christmas Carol* you were watching?” she asked.

Darcy gave a little laugh. “Yeah. I love that movie. Can I get you something to drink? A Fresca? Or how about a hot chocolate?”

“Hot chocolate sounds good.”

She watched Darcy take a bottle of water from the mini-fridge, fill a mug, and pop it into a small microwave mounted on the wall. While it heated, she pulled a packet of Swiss Miss and a spoon from a drawer.

The RV was surprisingly warm, and Jasmine removed her mittens, hat, and coat and dropped them behind her in the chair. She kicked off her shoes, curled a leg up beneath her, and looked around. The design of the RV made the most of its small space, with a miniature living room, kitchen, and dining room sharing the front half, and a bathroom and bedroom tucked into the back. The color scheme of the upholstery, which covered nearly every surface, was lavender, pink, and beige, which should have been pretty, but a general grubbiness lay over everything. Jasmine felt better about her own housekeeping.

The microwave dinged. Jasmine looked in its direction and found Darcy watching her with that look that was becoming familiar. That glow. It warmed her.

“I didn’t expect you,” Darcy said.

“Yes, well.” Jasmine swung her uncurled foot and forced herself not to look away. “I was curious.”

Darcy took the hot water from the microwave, poured the chocolate powder into it, and stirred. “That makes two of us,” she said softly. She handed the warm mug to Jasmine and sat in the driver’s seat across from her. They swiveled their chairs so that they faced each other.

“*The Muppets Christmas Carol* is my favorite Christmas movie,” Jasmine said.

“Just when I think I can’t like you any better, you throw that at me.”

Jasmine raised a brow. “Oh come on. You hardly know me.”

“I know,” Darcy said. “Isn’t it great? We still have so much to learn.”

After one kiss, she was acting like they had a future together. It was flattering, but not very likely.

“You know more about me than I know about you,” Jasmine said. “Tell me about yourself. You’re from Spokane?”

“Not originally.” Darcy kicked off her own shoes and propped her feet up on the edge of Jasmine’s chair. Her socks were red and black and thick. She pushed with her toes and made Jasmine’s chair rock gently back and forth. The edge of her foot brushed Jasmine’s thigh with every push. “I grew up on a farm outside Wilbur in Lincoln County.”

“Really? You’re a farm girl?”

“No, I was a farm girl. I moved to Spokane when I was fifteen.”

“What high school did you go to?”

“I didn’t. I got my GED.”

“At fifteen? You must be pretty smart.”

“I was eighteen when I got the GED.”

“Are your parents still alive?”

“I think my mom is.”

“You think?”

Darcy shrugged. “We don’t have much of a relationship.”

That was putting it mildly, Jasmine thought, if she didn't even know if her mom was alive or dead. But the glow in Darcy's eyes was dimming and the atmosphere in the RV was growing grim. Jasmine switched the subject.

"Have you always known you were a lesbian?"

Darcy grinned. "Ever since I saw *The Journey of Natty Gann*."

"Oh, I love that movie."

"There you go again."

Jasmine laughed and took a sip of her hot chocolate. It was lukewarm and watery, which made her feel tender. She let her thigh relax a bit against Darcy's foot.

"What about you?" Darcy asked. "Have you always known?"

"Not really," Jasmine said. "I was never very interested in boys, but I didn't think about girls much either, growing up. Mostly I just thought about taking care of Rose. And art. I was pretty self-centered,

I guess."

"Hardly. Have you always taken care of Rose, even when you were little?"

"Not so little. I was eight years old when she was born, and Mom didn't really have me start taking care of her until two years later. Rose was potty trained by then, so it wasn't hard."

Darcy's face made a combination smile and frown. "Not hard? I've watched toddlers before, Jasmine. They don't call them the terrible twos for nothing."

Jasmine smiled. "Well, Rose was always a good kid. She's smart too, really smart. That's why it's so important to get all these trees sold. I have to make enough money so she can go to a good college."

"From one season of Christmas tree sales?"

"Why not? If we sell every tree, we'll more than double our investment," Jasmine said. "Besides I still have next year. She's only a junior."

"What about scholarships?"

Jasmine shook her head. "She's smart, but she doesn't have good enough grades for scholarships. She tanked in middle school, and she's been catching up ever since. That's my fault. I should never have let her go live with her dad after Mom died. It wasn't a good situation. I knew she wasn't happy, but I didn't realize how bad it was until she ran away."

"Rose ran away?"

"Yes. She was thirteen years old. It took her two days to come by bus and find me in Chicago, and when I called to tell him she was with me, he didn't even know she was gone."

"Oh, no."

"Yeah."

"How is that your fault?" Darcy asked. "You were only, what? Nineteen when your mom died?"

"Yeah, but I knew how he was. He could barely take care of himself. I just thought, with Rose to take care of, he'd shape up. We both did. Besides, I didn't think we had a choice. He was her dad. I was just the half-sister, and I was pretty young and ignorant. I didn't even know I could be her guardian."

"You were a baby," Darcy said, frowning. "How could you have known?"

The mood was growing dark again. Jasmine returned to the previous conversation. "So anyway, it wasn't until I went to college that I met a woman and...well, when I finally figured it out, it was so obvious."

Darcy smiled. "It always is. Was it serious? The woman in college?"

“No,” Jasmine said. “I thought it was at the time, but looking back? No.”

“Anyone since then?”

Jasmine looked into her mug, shook her head, and took a sip of chocolate.

“Well, you haven’t asked, but I don’t have a girlfriend either,” Darcy said, dispensing with Sierra without a thought.

Jasmine looked up, shocked that such an idea had not even occurred to her.

Darcy laughed at her expression. “Oh, Jasmine, you are so cute.” She rose, stood before Jasmine, and slowly leaned down, resting her hands on the arms of Jasmine’s chair, until her face was only inches away.

Jasmine stared into Darcy’s eyes, infinite pools of green and gray, and she felt a pull from somewhere deep, beyond the eyes. Eyes are the windows to the soul, they said. Is that what she saw? Darcy’s soul? Who was this woman who looked at Jasmine like she really saw her? With her leg still tucked beneath her and her hands wrapped around the mug of chocolate, Jasmine felt incapable of moving, but it wasn’t a bad feeling. Her heart beat fast and her chest rose with every breath. She moved her gaze from Darcy’s eyes to her lips, and Darcy responded to the signal.

The kiss started much like the first, gentle and slow, but it didn’t stay that way. It grew longer, harder, and required more participation from Jasmine. When Darcy finally broke away and stood upright again, Jasmine was breathless and dizzy.

Darcy was too, apparently. She put a hand to her heart, took a deep breath, and said, “Wow.”

“Yeah,” Jasmine said. Darcy had kissed her twice now. It was enough to know that she wanted more. For the third kiss, though, she wanted her hands free. She leaned to the side, put her mug on the dashboard, and stood up. Darcy was so close that Jasmine’s breasts brushed against her as she rose, and her nipples tingled. She put her hands on Darcy’s shoulders. Darcy’s hands came down to rest on Jasmine’s hips, and they kissed again. Jasmine slid her hands around Darcy’s neck, tiptoed, and pressed closer. The touch of their bodies added fire to the kiss.

“Oh, Jasmine,” Darcy said when the kiss ended. She rested her forehead against Jasmine’s, her breath shaky, and said, “I don’t want to scare you, but you make me feel something I’ve never felt before. This is something new.”

Jasmine looked up and stared again into Darcy’s eyes. What she felt was new too, and it was exciting, but that didn’t mean she trusted it. Maybe that really was Darcy’s soul she saw burning through her eyes. She hoped it was. Or maybe it was a trick of her own heart, wishing for something so much she imagined it. She was too old to be fooled by an optical illusion.

She stepped back. “I have to go,” she said. “Rose will wonder where I am.”

Darcy bit her lip.

Jasmine sat and pulled on her shoes.

“Did you walk here?” Darcy asked.

“Yes.”

Darcy retrieved her own shoes. “I’ll walk you back.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Yes, I do. I’ll worry about you if I don’t.”

Jasmine felt a bubble of happiness at the words. “All right. Then I’ll give you a ride back here.”

“It’s a deal.”

It seemed colder than ever when they stepped outside, so cold Jasmine’s nose hairs froze with her first inhale, but a pleasurable nugget of hope, caused by the woman walking beside her,

kept her warm. Darcy might be too good to be true. She probably was. But wasn't it possible that she wasn't? Maybe, just maybe, Darcy was simply true.

Chapter Ten

“YOU HAVE EVERYTHING under control here?” Darcy asked.

Caitlin narrowed her eyes and pinched her lips. With her floppy Santa hat on, she looked remarkably like the Grinch. “Why?” she asked. “Are you going to Jazzy’s again?”

“As a matter of fact, I am,” Darcy said, “not that it’s any of your business.”

“She’s just using you, you know. Just because she takes your handouts doesn’t mean she likes you.”

Darcy gave Caitlin a hard look. “I don’t recall asking for your opinion.”

Caitlin swung the tip of the Santa hat back like it was a ponytail. “I went to school with her sister once. She’s a loser. They’re both loser users.”

“That’s enough, Caitlin,” Darcy said firmly. “I don’t want to hear anything more from you about Jasmine or her sister or her Christmas tree lot or anything to do with her. You understand?”

“Fine. It’s your funeral.” Caitlin flounced her hat again and turned back to the cash register, just as a customer showed up with a tree tag. She smiled sweetly. “Find what you were looking for, sir?”

Darcy left her to it. Her patience was wearing thin with that girl. She was good at the cash register, though, and working with the customers was buffing off some of the rough edges she’d accrued living on the streets. Darcy didn’t want to remove her from the job, no matter how aggravating she was to Darcy personally. The transition from being a street kid to becoming a responsible working adult was tricky, and many of them never managed it. If Darcy fired Caitlin now, she might never have the confidence to try working again. It was her damn crush that was the problem. If Caitlin would just get over thinking she was in love with Darcy, she would be a great employee.

The sun shone as Darcy walked down the block to Jasmine’s lot, and the temperature hovered near the twenties. The worst of the deep freeze seemed to be over. The day was crisp, but the sun took the bite out of it. It lifted her spirits despite her anxiety.

She’d scared Jasmine last night. Darcy knew it was a mistake the moment she told Jasmine how she felt. Jasmine’s dark eyes, which had been shining with happiness, immediately dulled, like a dusty veil had been pulled over them. Darcy bit her tongue, but it was too late. She couldn’t take back the words.

Both of them had felt the power of their kisses. Darcy couldn’t be mistaken about that. Just the memory of them made her knees weak. She hoped they were enough to convince Jasmine not to be scared off for good.

It was afternoon already, but it was the first chance Darcy had to get away from the SleepSafe lot. Business was still booming at SleepSafe, but “Jazzy’s TRADITIONAL Christmas Trees” was quiet as usual. Rose sat at the card table next to the propane heater hunched over a textbook, pencil flying over a sheet of paper. She looked up and smiled when Darcy entered the lot.

“Hi Darcy.”

“Hi Rose. Doing homework?”

“Yeah. One more week ‘til break. I can’t wait.”

Darcy saw Rose with new eyes after learning how close she’d come to becoming one of Darcy’s lost street kids at the tender age of thirteen. Darcy knew of some street kids that young, but not many. It could happen to anyone, Darcy knew that better than most, but to think of it happening to Rose was particularly frightening. She seemed so young and innocent and fresh, so vulnerable. Thank God she’d had Jasmine to turn to when she needed her.

“Jasmine’s not here,” Rose said. “She’s cleaning Dilly’s mom’s chimney.”

“Cleaning the chimney?”

“Yeah. She worked for a chimney sweep company once.” Rose gave a proud smile.

“Jasmine’s done a lot of things. You’d be surprised at the things she can do.”

“I guess so. Really? A chimney sweep? Like on Mary Poppins?” Darcy had visions of Jasmine climbing on roofs and sliding down chimneys.

Rose laughed at the expression on Darcy’s face. “Yeah, sort of, except she cleans them from the bottom up. You should see how dirty she gets.”

“Why is she doing that?”

“They made a deal. They’re trading cars ‘til Christmas, our car for Dilly’s bus, but Jasmine has to clean his mom’s chimney first.”

“Oh.” Darcy had an uneasy feeling. “Why is she borrowing his bus?”

“You know, so she can stay here at night, like you said. For security.”

Crap. Darcy had never meant for Jasmine to spend the night in Dilly’s bus. Or maybe she did, but that was before. Suddenly, Darcy didn’t like the idea of Jasmine spending the night alone at the lot.

“What about you?” Darcy asked.

“Me?” Rose made a face. “I’m not spending the night in that freezing little bus. I’ll spend the night in the comfort of my own home, thank you very much.”

“By yourself?”

“Of course. I am seventeen, you know.”

“Yeah. How long does it take to clean a chimney?”

“She’ll be back by dark,” Rose said with an understanding look.

“What’s that you’re working on?” Darcy asked to divert attention from her.

Rose grimaced again. “Math.”

“You don’t like it?”

“No, I do like math,” Rose said. “It’s my favorite subject, but I’m kind of behind right now. This Christmas tree business is time consuming, and I’m taking geometry and pre-calc at the same time.”

“Two math classes? Isn’t that kind of unusual?”

“Yeah. They made an exception for me. I’m smart,” Rose said, matter of fact, “but I’m behind. I need to catch up if I’m going to get into a good college.”

“Where do you want to go?”

Rose shrugged. “I’d be fine going to Eastern, or even community college at first. But Jasmine wants me to at least go to Wazzu or U-Dub, maybe even a private college. She wants me to live in a dorm and have the whole college experience.”

“Don’t you want that?”

“Sure, I’d love it. But it’s not the most important thing in the world,” Rose said. “Jasmine worries about it too much. She gave up school for me, and she had a scholarship even, but she acts like the world’s going to end if I don’t have the best college experience ever.”

“Really? She went to the Art Institute of Chicago, didn’t she?” Darcy asked. “She got a scholarship there?”

“Yes. She’s amazingly talented. Not just at making candy ornaments.” Rose gestured to the box of tree decorations beside her. “You should see her paintings.”

“I’d love to.” Darcy picked up one of the candy snowmen from the box and held it up by its string. It wore a letterman jacket from the University of Washington, and Darcy coveted it. “Well, I went to U-Dub, so if you have any questions about it or need a reference, let me know, okay?”

“Sure. Thanks.”

Darcy returned to Jasmine’s lot after closing. She could see the glow of lights from Dilly’s bus, which was parked on the edge of the lot inside the fence. She pulled out her phone and punched Jasmine’s number.

“Hi.”

The tiny breathy word made Darcy’s knees weak. “Hi yourself,” she said. “Are you really spending the night in that tin can?”

Pause. “Are you stalking me again?”

“I can’t help it. Can I come in?”

The door to the bus opened. Jasmine stepped down, and the motion-sensing security light popped on and lit her up like she was a superstar. “Where are you?”

“Here,” Darcy said.

Jasmine slid the door to the bus closed, trotted over to the gate, and unlocked it. “Hi,” she said again.

“Hi,” Darcy said. She followed Jasmine to the bus.

Jasmine slid the door open, waved a hand, and said, “Welcome to the tin can.”

Darcy stepped up. There was no room to move forward and let Jasmine up behind her without sitting, so she sat on the bench seat and scooted over behind the foldout table. Jasmine climbed up, closed the door, and sat beside Darcy. There was nowhere else to sit. The tiny spot of floor space in the bus was filled with the plastic crates of candy ornaments. On the far side of the table, as promised by Rose, were a small sink and refrigerator, as well as a counter with a two-foot tree perched on it, decorated with tiny pinecones, feathers, and silver bells.

“Cute,” Darcy said, gesturing to the tree.

“Thanks.”

The table was covered with candy pieces in various color combinations. An orange extension cord snaked through a sliver of an opening in the window and was connected to Jasmine’s fondue pot of candy glue and to a tabletop electric heater. A ceiling lamp provided light.

“Do you ever stop working?” Darcy asked.

Jasmine smiled. “Rose won’t let me.” She fingered some of the candies, arranging green and red pieces into a wreath. “She thinks we’re going to get a run on trees, and the world might end if everyone doesn’t get an ornament.”

“She might be right,” Darcy said. “The biggest rush of tree buyers is still coming.”

“Thank God,” Jasmine said.

Darcy lifted one of Jasmine’s restless hands. She drew the hand close and examined the nails. Black grime was embedded beneath them. Darcy pictured Jasmine with soot all over her, and she

smiled. She was glad Jasmine hadn't been cleaning chimneys the first time she'd examined her nails, or she might have made some wrong assumptions and missed the chance of getting to know Jasmine altogether. Lesson learned. You can't judge a girl by her nails.

Jasmine tugged at her hand. "It's ash," she said. "It gets everywhere."

Darcy met her eyes, pulled the fingers closer, and dropped a kiss on them. "Everywhere?"

Jasmine crinkled her nose and pulled her hand away.

Darcy chuckled. They sat so closely their thighs and shoulders touched. The air in the bus was cool, but their closeness, along with the blood zinging through Darcy's veins, made her feel warm.

"You know, I didn't really mean for you to spend the night out here all alone," Darcy said. "I was thinking more of Dilly doing it."

Jasmine's brows rose. "Dilly? Why?"

Darcy hesitated.

"Because he's a guy?" Jasmine asked. "That's kind of sexist, isn't it? Besides, *you* spend the night out here all alone."

"Yeah, but I'm trained in security," Darcy said. "I'm better prepared."

"Come on, you think Dilly's more prepared to provide security than me?" Jasmine asked.

"Let me tell you about Dilly. We met in the 9th grade when he was being picked on by a bunch of bullies. They were only 7th graders, but they were mean. I chased them away. So who do you think could provide better security, me or him?"

Darcy laughed. "You." Jasmine, she was learning, was an extremely capable woman. Still, she hesitated. She didn't want to scare Jasmine off again like she had the night before. "It's not because he's a guy. It's because you're you. I'm growing fond of you, Jasmine." Trying to act matter-of-fact about it, Darcy raised her right arm and draped it over Jasmine's shoulders. "I'm afraid I might worry about you."

After a tense moment that Darcy pretended not to notice, Jasmine relaxed and leaned against Darcy's side. Jasmine raised her head, their eyes met, and, as naturally as breathing, they kissed.

It was as wonderful as it had been the night before. Better. Darcy didn't want it to end. Jasmine didn't seem to either, and the kiss lengthened. When she felt Jasmine's fingers brush her cheek and slip to the back of her neck, Darcy tingled all over. She wanted to scoop Jasmine up, pull her into her lap, and kiss her all night long, but there was no room. There was no room to do anything but sit awkwardly side by side, their necks cricked so that their lips could meet. They finally parted, breathless and smiling.

"I missed you today," Darcy said. "Did Rose tell you I stopped by?"

"Yes," Jasmine said. She looked as if she might say something more, and Darcy waited for her to say she missed her too. She didn't. Instead she snuggled a little closer into Darcy's side, which was just as good.

Darcy looked around. "Where do you sleep in this thing?"

"Uh..."

"Oh no! I didn't mean...I wasn't suggesting anything. I...oh crap."

Jasmine laughed. "The seat folds out, after I remove the table."

"Will you be warm enough in here?"

"I'll be all right. I have a sleeping bag. And the heater."

Darcy sighed and rested her cheek on Jasmine's forehead. "I wish I could stay with you. Just for security, of course. And warmth."

Jasmine smiled. "Of course."

“What are you going to do in the morning? Can you cook in this thing? You should come over for breakfast. I’ll make you waffles.”

“Toaster waffles?”

“Well, yeah,” Darcy said. “Or I can fix you some oatmeal.”

“Instant?”

“Are you criticizing my cooking?”

Jasmine chuckled. “A little. I’d love to come over for breakfast. What time?”

“As soon as you wake up.”

“You might regret that.”

“I don’t think so.”

Jasmine turned her head for another kiss, a quick one, and stood. Darcy scooted over and Jasmine turned to her. Darcy, still seated, took Jasmine’s hands in hers and looked up, her heart filled with hope. Jasmine might not find it easy to say the words, but her tender smile and sparkling eyes spoke volumes. She felt it too, Darcy was sure. They were on a path to something wonderful.

Darcy stood and wrapped her arms fully around Jasmine. The quarters were cramped, but they wanted to be close anyway. For a long moment, they simply stood holding onto each other and gazing into each other’s eyes. It was all they needed at that moment.

Finally Darcy sighed. “I’d better go.”

They climbed from the bus and walked to the gate.

“Did you walk over?” Jasmine asked.

“No, I drove. Just lock the gate after me and I’ll be fine.”

“Okay.” Jasmine opened the gate, ushered Darcy through, and closed it again. She gripped the chain link. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning then.”

“Sweet dreams, Jasmine.”

Chapter Eleven

JASMINE FORCED HERSELF to wait until the sun rose before heading over to Darcy's. They were closing in on the shortest day of the year, though, so it wasn't until nearly eight o'clock when she finally made her way to Darcy's lot. She was starving.

The gate was unlocked. Tied to the gate handle with a white ribbon was a lavender rose. Jasmine smiled, untied the ribbon, and took the rose with her to the RV. The door opened before she could knock, and Darcy stood there with a hint of a smile on her face.

Jasmine held up the rose. "It's beautiful," she said.

"So are you," Darcy said.

Jasmine climbed into the RV and gasped. More lavender roses stood in a vase on the table next to an assortment of cut fruit, a tray of pastries, and a pitcher of orange juice.

"Oh, look what you did!"

"I'm not much of a cook," Darcy said, "but I can shop."

"What time did you get up?"

Darcy shrugged. "I couldn't sleep anyway."

"Me either," Jasmine said and moved into Darcy's arms. It was astonishing to her how quickly it had become a natural place to be. Somehow Darcy had convinced her, without even trying, that her arms were a safe haven, that Jasmine could be sure of her welcome there, that she would always be embraced. With a happy sigh, they melted into another kiss.

They were too hungry to kiss for long, though. They sat on opposite sides of the table and pushed the flowers to the side so they could look at each other as they ate.

"What's your favorite Christmas memory?" Darcy asked.

Jasmine popped a grape in her mouth and tried to think of what it was that made her heart light at Christmas. "Advent calendars, I think," she said finally. "Mom always bought one with tiny chocolates in it. When Rose was really little, I got them all myself, except for Sundays. Mom got the Sunday chocolates. When Rose was bigger, we had to take turns, but it was still fun."

Darcy had a croissant halfway to her mouth, like she'd forgotten she was eating. Her eyes smiled. "Do you still do that?"

"Not since Mom died. I haven't thought of it for years, until now." Jasmine shook her head.

"What about you? What's your favorite Christmas memory?"

"Picking out the tree," Darcy said without hesitation. "We always picked one from our own land, so I scouted all year long for the best one. When it came time to pick one, everybody got a vote, but they always ended up picking mine. Because it was the best."

"She said modestly," Jasmine mocked.

Darcy grinned. "That's why, when I was trying to come up with a fund-raiser idea for SleepSafe, I decided to sell Christmas trees. I love them."

Jasmine stared into Darcy's eyes, and for a moment she forgot to talk. In Darcy's eyes she saw answers to questions she didn't know she had, and the longer she looked the more she saw. Finally she blinked. Trees, she reminded herself. They were talking about trees.

"Do you still go out and cut one down for yourself?" Jasmine asked, slightly breathless.

"No," Darcy said slowly. She didn't smile, and her gaze was intense. Jasmine wondered if she saw answers too, when she looked into Jasmine's eyes. Darcy licked her lips. "I don't put up a tree. I get enough of trees here at the lot."

"Oh." Jasmine felt anticipation like a physical buzz against her skin. Without any discussion, Darcy stood and Jasmine rose to meet her. They kissed again, but it was different this time, less exploratory and more passionate. It was a kiss that contained a promise, a kiss that explained why neither of them could sleep the night before.

Darcy slipped her thigh between Jasmine's legs and pressed upward, and Jasmine gasped. Darcy backed up until she reached the roomy passenger chair, dropped into it, and drew Jasmine down with her. Jasmine landed on Darcy's lap, facing her and straddling her thigh. Jasmine rocked forward, leaned into Darcy, and kissed her more deeply. Darcy's hands roamed across Jasmine's back, slipped beneath her sweater, caressed her skin, and unhooked her bra.

Jasmine let her. The trust she felt in Darcy's arms extended beyond kisses. She felt Darcy's hands sweep across her breasts, felt thumbs brush her nipples. She shivered, but the hardness of Darcy's thigh between her legs compelled her. Jasmine rocked forward and moaned.

"That's right," Darcy said. Jasmine rocked back and forward again. Darcy put her hand on Jasmine's butt and pressed her down against Darcy's thigh, and Jasmine moaned again. "Yes, Jazzy," Darcy whispered, her mouth at Jasmine's ear. "Come to me."

Jasmine rocked again and waves came over her. She arched back, barely aware that Darcy held her and kept her from falling. Everything centered on the throbbing that clutched between her legs. When it finally subsided, she collapsed against Darcy, who held her tightly against her chest and gently swiveled the chair.

Gradually, Jasmine caught her breath and came to her senses. She was still fully dressed, aside from the loosened bra, but she felt more exposed than she'd ever been in her life. Never had she let herself go in front of someone like she'd just done with Darcy. She was prepared to feel embarrassed, but just then she felt soft kisses pressed against her forehead. She sat up, slightly bashful. "I guess I lost control a little."

"It was beautiful." Darcy's smile was tender and—Jasmine swallowed—full of love. She'd never been smiled at like that before, but there was no mistaking it. She sighed. It was Monday morning, and business loomed. She lifted herself off Darcy's lap. "I need to get home and take a shower."

"Me too," Darcy said. "A cold one. I'm late for work already. Can you come back tonight?"

"Doesn't that defeat the purpose of staying in the bus?" Jasmine asked. "I can't provide security for the lot if I'm not there."

"Tomorrow morning then?" Darcy asked. "Earlier, though. What took you so long getting here today?"

"I didn't want to show up too early."

"I was ready for you at six-thirty."

Jasmine smiled. "Okay. Tomorrow morning."

“DID YOU REALLY sleep in that thing last night?” Colleen asked. “What did you do when you had to go to the bathroom? It doesn’t even have a toilet like Darcy’s RV.”

“I used the porta-potty,” Jasmine said. “And so does Darcy. She doesn’t use the toilet in the RV because it’s too hard to get it pumped this time of year.”

Colleen looked up from the ornament she was twirling. “How do you know that?”

Jasmine hesitated. She and Colleen didn’t normally talk about girlfriends or dating, even though they’d been best friends since they met in art class their senior year of high school. It was their shared interest in art that bonded them. Jasmine had never felt the need to talk about dating before, but this time she kind of wanted to.

“Jasmine?” Colleen looked interested. “Have you been in there?”

Jasmine nodded. “I went over Saturday night for a little while. And this morning I had breakfast there.”

Colleen laid the ornament carefully in its box. “Wow. This is interesting. I kind of thought she’d be a good match for you, but I just thought... You never date.”

“Yeah, I know,” Jasmine said, “but it’s different with Darcy. She makes it seem so natural, so easy.”

“That’s how it’s supposed to be.”

“I know, but it’s not how it usually works. You know how it is. Most girls seem to expect a commitment before you even go on a date.”

Colleen made a twisted smile. “No, I don’t know how it is. Men don’t do that. Most of them don’t want a commitment no matter how many dates you’ve been on.”

“Well, with Darcy it’s just been simple. We haven’t gone on any dates, we just visit with each other.”

“Visit?” Colleen asked. “What exactly does that mean? Have you kissed?”

Jasmine nodded, tried not to smile, and failed.

“More than kissed?”

“A little,” Jasmine said.

“Great! It’s about time you got some, girl.”

“Yeah, right.” Jasmine slumped. “That’s the problem. I don’t really know how to ‘get some,’ let alone how to ‘give some.’”

“Huh? What are you talking about? You had that girlfriend in college.”

“Yeah, but she didn’t know what she was doing any more than I did. We only dated a few weeks, and we never actually, you know, went all the way.”

“Jasmine. Are you kidding me? Are you telling me you’re a virgin?”

Jasmine nodded.

“Holy cow. Does Darcy know?”

“No! I can’t tell her that. It’s embarrassing,” Jasmine said. “I just have to fake it ‘til I make it, isn’t that what they say? I’m sure I’ll figure it out, right?”

“I guess so. Most people do. What exactly do two girls do together anyway?”

“You’re asking me? What do I know? You heterosexual girls have it so easy. First,” Jasmine counted on her fingers, “they teach you about it in sex ed. Second, it’s all over the movies and TV. And third, guys do all the work anyway. Girls just have to lie back and think of the queen.”

“Not true. We do way more than that.”

“Lesbians have it so much harder. I tried looking it up on the Internet once, but all I got was porn.”

“How do you know you’re a lesbian if you’ve never even tried it?”

“Tried sex, you mean? What’s that got to do with being a lesbian?”

Colleen looked dumfounded.

“No,” Jasmine said, “what I mean is, did you have to have sex with a man before you knew you were heterosexual?”

“Well, no,” Colleen said. “I was always pretty boy crazy. But I have wondered what it would be like to have sex with a woman.”

“That doesn’t make you a lesbian any more than it makes me straight just because I’ve wondered what a penis feels like.”

“Okay, so you’re a lesbian. What are you going to do about Darcy?”

“Nothing, for now,” Jasmine said. “We just visit in the mornings. There’s no other time right now.”

“Right. Nobody ever has sex in the morning.”

Chapter Twelve

EVERY CLICHÉ SHE'D ever heard about falling in love was true, Darcy realized. She floated on air. Butterflies fluttered in her chest. She expected at any moment to have songbirds land on her head and whistle love songs in her ear. She could almost hear them already.

The hours at the office dragged by, but she caught herself humming and whistling. She left work early, stopped at World Market, and picked up the biggest, most fancy chocolate advent calendar she could find. Working at the lot that evening was excruciating, knowing Jasmine was only a block away, but she forced herself to stay put. The kids on the lot squabbled and, instead of butting their heads together and telling them to grow up, like she usually did, she smiled at them and told them they were cute. Caitlin looked suspicious, but Darcy didn't care.

Finally, the lot closed. The sign was unplugged and the last of the kids left. Darcy looked at her phone, counted the hours to morning, and decided they were too many. She punched Jasmine's number.

"Hi there."

"Hi," Darcy said, content for a moment just to hear Jasmine's voice.

"How was your day?" Jasmine asked.

"Torture," Darcy said. "It lasted an eternity. I missed you."

Jasmine gave a soft laugh. "I'll be there in nine hours."

"That's too long. Can I come over? I can be there in five minutes."

"What about your lot? Aren't you supposed to be there to provide security?"

"It's early still," Darcy said. "Most property crimes occur late at night. I have a present for you."

"A present?"

"A chocolate present."

"Well then, what are you waiting for? I'll see you in five minutes."

Darcy was there in three. Jasmine met her at the gate, let her in, and locked it behind her.

The inside of the bus was configured differently this time. The table was gone, and the bench seat was folded down to create a bed in the back of the bus. Jasmine's sleeping bag and pillow were spread out on it. It was the only place to sit, which they were forced to do, since there was less floor space than ever.

Jasmine sat, pulled her legs up, and wrapped her arms around them. Darcy sat facing her, one leg on the floor, and simply gazed at her. Black curls framed Jasmine's face, and her eyes were huge and dark with lashes that must have been half an inch long. She sucked her lips in, as if trying not to smile, and dimples appeared in her cheeks. She looked down. "You're staring."

"Sorry," Darcy said softly. She leaned forward, ducked her head, and captured Jasmine's lips with her own. The kiss started innocently enough, but the bed was right there, and Jasmine was barely balanced upright on her butt. It was the easiest thing in the world to tip her over onto the mattress. Darcy followed and deepened the kiss, and Jasmine let her.

It was several minutes before they paused to catch their breath. Their clothing was rumpled and loose where hands had slipped underneath, but they were still fully dressed. It was too cold in the bus to bare their skin.

“I think you said something about chocolate?” Jasmine said.

“Oh yeah.” Darcy sat up and located the paper sack from World Market on the floor. “Here.”

Jasmine sat up, took the package, and peeked inside. She gasped. “Oh Darcy!” She slipped the advent calendar out of the sack and held it in her hands for a full minute, her fingers tracing the drawing on the front of Santa and his elves. When she looked up, her eyes were wet. “I can’t believe you did this. I love it.”

Darcy’s grin felt like it was going to split her face. Jasmine’s reaction was everything she’d hoped it would be. The thought came to her that she must remember to get Jasmine an advent calendar every year. She was already thinking of Jasmine as forever. She had known her for seventeen days.

Darcy looked down at the advent calendar before Jasmine was able to read her thoughts. Seventeen days might be long enough for Darcy to know what she wanted, but she wasn’t so sure about Jasmine. The last thing she wanted to do was scare her off by making her feelings known too soon.

“I expect you to share those chocolates with Rose, now,” Darcy said.

“Fine, but I get the first one. I’m oldest.” Jasmine poked a finger into the first advent window, opened the flap, and tipped out the chocolate. It was wrapped in gold paper.

“Actually, I’m the oldest,” Darcy said. “In case you felt like sharing.”

Jasmine unwrapped the chocolate and bit it in half. A trail of caramel dripped out and landed on her chin. She laughed, licked at the caramel, and tucked the other half of the candy into Darcy’s mouth. Darcy sucked at Jasmine’s finger, savoring it more than the chocolate or caramel, and Jasmine’s laughter stopped. Darcy reached out, wiped Jasmine’s chin with her thumb, and followed her thumb with her mouth. Moments later they were lying down again. Hands roamed, and it no longer seemed too cold to remove clothing.

Darcy pulled Jasmine’s sweater off over her head. Her bra, which was already unhooked, came off next. Darcy reached for the button of Jasmine’s jeans, but Jasmine stopped her and instead reached for the zipper on Darcy’s sweatshirt. Darcy got the message. Together they removed Darcy’s top and bra, and the kissing resumed, along with exploration from the waist up.

It soon became apparent, though, that naked only from the waist up wasn’t going to do. They were both moaning and whimpering and writhing against each other, dry humping as best they could in the cramped space. The second time Darcy reached for the top of Jasmine’s jeans, Jasmine helped, and moments later, they were both naked.

The light in the bus was dim, but it was enough to confirm what Darcy’s hands had already told her. Jasmine’s body was beautiful and perfect. Her breasts were full, her nipples dark, her belly just slightly pouched, and her butt round and firm. Most perfect of all was how responsive Jasmine’s body was to Darcy’s touch. Even better, she thought moments later, was how responsive her own body was to Jasmine’s delicate touch, and how much pleasure Jasmine seemed to take in getting those responses from Darcy.

Forever, Darcy thought again, and she had to bite her tongue at the crucial moment not to cry out, “I love you!”

Chapter Thirteen

“IT’S FIFTEEN DAYS ‘til Christmas,” Rose said, “so we have to eat ten chocolates to get caught up. You already ate one, so I get five and you get four.”

“And here I thought you were so behind in math,” Jasmine said.

Rose made a face at her and popped a chocolate in her mouth. “I wonder how Darcy knew we loved advent calendars.”

“I mentioned it to her,” Jasmine said. “We were talking about our favorite Christmas memories.”

“Really?” Rose unwrapped another chocolate, wasting no time in getting the calendar all caught up. “It was very thoughtful of her to get one for us. This is a good one too. The chocolates are way bigger than the ones Mom used to get.”

“Mom got the best she could afford,” Jasmine said, unwrapping one of the four chocolates Rose had doled out for her.

“I know that,” Rose said. “I’m just saying this one is a good one. Ooh, cashews.” Rose crunched her chocolate with a thoughtful expression on her face. After swallowing, she asked, “Do you think Darcy is a lesbian?”

Jasmine caught her breath, and a tiny piece of chocolate lodged in her throat at exactly the wrong spot. She was wracked by a coughing fit. Rose patted her on the back, raised her arm, and forced her to drink some water. When the coughing finally subsided, Jasmine had to wipe her eyes and blow her nose, but Rose did not forget her question.

“Do you? Think Darcy is a lesbian?”

“Yes,” Jasmine squeaked out.

“Did she tell you?”

Jasmine was weakened by the coughing fit and had no resources for deception. She stared at Rose like a deer in headlights.

“Did you guys talk about it?” Rose asked.

Jasmine nodded.

Rose was not stupid. “Jasmine. Did you do more than talk about it? Jazzy, look at me.”

It was the same trick Jasmine always pulled on Rose, and it worked just as well. Jasmine looked at Rose, and the truth was out.

“OMG, you did,” Rose said, and her cheeks turned pink. “That’s why she gave us chocolates.” She snatched the calendar to her chest. “I’m still keeping half.”

Jasmine gave a little laugh. “The chocolates were a gift for both of us.”

Rose looked thoughtful again, gave Jasmine a tender smile, and said, “I like her, Jazz.”

THEY DEVELOPED A routine. Darcy joined Jasmine in the bus in the evening, and Jasmine visited Darcy in the RV in the morning. Sleep suffered, but neither of them seemed to mind. They forgot to eat sometimes, too.

Gradually, almost without her being aware of it, Jasmine's trust in Darcy grew. She needn't have worried about the mechanics of sex. When it came to it, she touched what she wanted to touch, and she let herself be touched. She let herself feel. It wasn't just about sex. For the first time Jasmine understood what the term "making love" was all about. Every time they made love, Jasmine felt they were creating something. She hadn't actually said the word "love" out loud, nor had Darcy, but there was a new and wonderful feeling growing inside her. The same feeling that made sleep and food unnecessary, and she wondered if that might be it.

Her days, though, were spent alone. Tree sales at Jasmine's lot were still slow. She lived with the sick realization that she had squandered their little pot of Rose's college fund on a dismal failure, but even that wasn't enough to dim the general sense of happiness she had with Darcy.

A couple of days after Jasmine's talk with Rose, a woman strolled into "Jazzy's TRADITIONAL Christmas Trees" with a camera in one hand and a digital recorder in the other. She wore heels and hose and walked like her feet hurt. "My name is Zoey Gilbreath," she said. "I'm a reporter for the Spokane Morning Review. I'm doing an article on Christmas tree lots around town. Do you mind if I mention yours?"

"Heck, no," Jasmine said. "We can use all the publicity we can get."

"Great." Zoey turned on her recorder. "You look very young. Have you had a Christmas tree lot before?"

"I'm twenty-five, and this is my first year," Jasmine said.

"How's business?" Zoey glanced around the lot. "You seem to have plenty of trees left."

Jasmine hesitated. She knew that success bred success. Who wants to buy trees, or anything else for that matter, from a failing business? "We have a large inventory," she said finally. "It's festive every day, and I meet lots of fun people."

Zoey nodded, but she didn't look fooled. "Is yours a for-profit lot?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I was just down the block at SleepSafe's lot," Zoey said. "Their profits go to the SleepSafe Youth homeless shelter. Is yours a non-profit too, or are you in it for the money?"

Jasmine's cheeks burned, and she was glad Zoey couldn't see it. The commercialism of Darcy's lot suddenly seemed a lot nobler than the artistry of Jasmine's.

"I hope to make a profit," she said tightly. Then, in case it made a difference, she added, "It's for my sister's college fund."

Zoey nodded again. "Do you work this lot all by yourself?"

"I have some part-time employees," Jasmine said, "but they have jobs or school too. I have no problem managing it by myself during the day."

"It's a big job for someone your age."

Jasmine bit her lip. She wanted to say that she wasn't a baby, that she was mature for her age, that twenty-five was plenty old enough, but everything she thought about saying only made her sound childish. "Mm," she finally murmured.

Zoey glanced up at the twinkle lights, which didn't show well in the daylight, frowned, and said, "Your sign says something about free ornaments. What's that about?"

Jasmine pulled a box out from under the table, opened it, and pulled out a snowman wearing WSU colors. "They're made out of candy," she said.

"Cute," Zoey said. "Where do you get those?"

“I make them.”

For the first time, Zoey didn't look bored. “You made this? Really? What else have you got?”

Jasmine took out a Santa and a reindeer. “The snowmen are the most popular,” she said. “People like the school colors.”

“I went to Whitworth.”

Jasmine bent to the second box and pulled out a snowman wearing crimson and black.

Zoey smiled. “How much are they?”

Jasmine shook her head. “Sorry, they're not for sale. You can get one for free, but you have to buy a tree.”

“That's crazy.”

Jasmine shrugged. “Those are the rules.”

Zoey grimaced, asked a few more questions, snapped a couple of pictures, and left.

ON SATURDAY MORNING, Darcy didn't have to leave to get to work. For the first time all week, they weren't rushed, and they were leisurely in their lovemaking. For Jasmine, it was her first real opportunity to explore Darcy's body, since she'd previously been too overwhelmed having her own body explored to do much of the reverse. She took her time while Darcy watched, smiling, and she found beauty in unexpected places. Darcy was leaner than Jasmine, her tummy was flatter, her hips less cushioned, and her breasts smaller. Jasmine enjoyed the contrast. She looked and touched, and touches led to kisses, which erased Darcy's smile and led to passion.

Afterward they lounged in bed chatting and eating yogurt and donuts.

Darcy lay naked on her side propped up on one elbow. “What are your Christmas day traditions?”

“They're pretty basic,” Jasmine said, sitting cross-legged with a sheet across her lap. “We get up and open our stockings. We have a big breakfast and go to church. It's the only day all year I go to church. I'm not religious, but we always went with Mom, and it just makes the day stand out a little, you know?”

Darcy nodded.

“Then we go home and open the presents under the tree.”

“Do you and Rose fill each other's stockings?” Darcy asked.

“Yes. Rose made a rule, nothing in the stockings can cost more than a dollar.”

“Rose sure likes rules, doesn't she?”

Jasmine laughed. “Yes, she does. I think it's because she didn't have any when she was with her dad. So we get little things like Chap Stick and packs of gum and things from the dollar store. It's fun trying to be creative with that kind of budget. This year I got her a Tweety Bird expandable towel, the kind you soak in water and it grows, and I got her a light-up necklace that looks like old-fashioned Christmas tree lights, and a candle that looks like an owl. She loves owls. And candy, of course.”

Darcy smiled. “Of course. What did you get her for under the tree?”

“A letterman jacket,” Jasmine said. “She earned a letter for tennis, but she doesn't have a jacket. She isn't expecting it. She knows how expensive they are. But I saved up.”

“Nice.”

“What about you?” Jasmine asked. “What are your Christmas day traditions?”

“I go help out at the SleepSafe shelter. They always have volunteers to help cook and serve a big meal to the kids, but they never have anything to do the rest of the day, and kids get restless on Christmas. They’ll get in trouble if they don’t have something to do, so I try to keep them busy. This year I got the South City Gym to open up their pool for us, so I’ll take the kids swimming.”

“You’re so good,” Jasmine said.

“No,” Darcy said, “I’m just lonely.”

Jasmine looked up from her yogurt cup. “Oh no!”

Darcy gave a twisted smile. “I didn’t mean that to sound so pathetic. What I mean is, Christmas is a hard day for people who don’t have family, which I don’t anymore. It helps me as much as it helps the kids to spend time with them.”

“What about your brother and sister? You don’t see them at Christmas?”

“No. They gave me up when I came out.”

“I’m sorry,” Jasmine said.

Darcy sat up and shrugged. “It was a long time ago.”

“Maybe they’ve changed their minds,” Jasmine said. “A lot of people have changed the way they think about gays and lesbians lately. They might be ready to accept it now.”

“They could find me if they wanted to,” Darcy said. “All they’d have to do is Google my name.”

“You’re welcome to join Rose and me for Christmas breakfast,” Jasmine said.

Darcy smiled, leaned forward, and kissed her. “Thanks. I’d love to.”

Both Christmas tree lots opened at ten, so shortly after nine Jasmine pulled her clothes on, enjoyed one last kiss, and opened the door of the RV.

Caitlin stood under the awning right outside the door.

“Oh!” Jasmine said.

“What is it?” Darcy came up behind Jasmine, pulling a sweater over her head. “Caitlin? What are you doing here so early?”

Caitlin didn’t answer. She swung a ring of keys around her finger, caught them in her palm, and swung them again, narrowed eyes flitting back and forth between Jasmine and Darcy. She was just a kid, but her expression gave Jasmine the chills. To hide it, she stepped onto the flimsy RV stair and onto the ground, brushing by Caitlin, who did not move.

“Thanks for the donut, Darcy,” Jasmine said and headed for the gate.

“Wait,” Darcy said, joining her. “I’ll walk with you. I’ll be right back, Caitlin. Hold down the fort.”

“I always do,” Caitlin said behind them.

By then Jasmine was at the gate, which was unlocked. “She has a key?” Jasmine asked after they passed through.

“She opens for me,” Darcy said.

“Is there something going on between you two?”

“With Caitlin? Hell no. She’s just a kid.”

“She’s not that young.”

“She has a crush on me. I’ve never given her any reason to, but…” Darcy shrugged. “I try to respect her feelings without giving her any hope. It’s a fine line sometimes.”

“Why do you have to respect her feelings?” Jasmine asked. “She doesn’t respect yours. And her feelings are inappropriate.”

“Come on, Jasmine.” Darcy stopped, put her hand on Jasmine’s arm, and turned to face her. “Didn’t you ever have a crush on an older woman?”

“Well, yeah, but I wasn’t like that. I kept it secret.”

“Well, not everyone’s the same,” Darcy said. “She’s a little rough around the edges, but she’ll grow out of it.”

“She gives me the evil eye,” Jasmine said. “It creeps me out.”

“I’ll talk to her,” Darcy said. She fingered one of Jasmine’s curls. “I’ll see you tonight?”

Jasmine nodded and smiled. “As soon as I close.”

AS DARCY HAD predicted, business was brisk on Saturday, even at “Jazzy’s TRADITIONAL Christmas Trees.” They didn’t sell the 18 per day they’d need to sell to make a profit, but they sold 15, which was more than they’d ever sold in a single day before. Jasmine no longer hoped to make a profit, but she still wanted to lose as little of Rose’s college fund as possible. She kept the lot open until nearly ten o’clock on Saturday night, and she kept breakfast with Darcy short on Sunday morning so she could open by nine. She went home, showered, and picked up Rose. They arrived at the lot at eight-fifty.

There was a line of people at the gate.

“Are you Jazzy?” a man asked as they walked up.

“I am.” Jasmine unlocked the gate. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here when you got here. Come on in.”

The small crowd surged in. Jasmine counted seven people.

“Do you still have Wazzu snowmen?” the man asked.

“Yes,” Jasmine said. “I have two, I think.”

“But I have to buy two trees to get two ornaments, right?” The man smiled like he was part of a conspiracy.

“Yes,” Rose said. “That’s the rule.”

“I got one,” a woman called. She wore a long red coat and dragged a tree up the aisle behind her.

“Wow, that was fast,” Jasmine said. People buying real trees, especially pricey ones like Jasmine’s, usually took some time picking out the right one.

“I want a Gonzaga ornament,” the woman said, puffing her way up to the table and dropping the tree carelessly to the ground.

“You mean a snowman?” Jasmine asked, while Rose unlocked Dilly’s bus, pulled a box of ornaments from the front seat, and carried it over to the table.

“Yeah, a snowman like what was in the paper this morning,” the woman said. “But for Gonzaga.”

“In the paper?”

“Yeah,” the woman said. “Didn’t you know you were in the newspaper this morning?”

“We were?”

“That’s where I saw it too,” the man said. “It said you only made a couple of each ornament. That’s why I got here early. I need a Wazzu.”

Jasmine looked from the man to the woman and back again. Behind them a pair of giggling women walked up. On the street a car door slammed, excited voices carried into the lot, and a family entered, two of them teenagers wearing Shadle lettermen jackets.

“We’re next in line,” one of the giggling women called. “We picked out our tree. We just need help getting it out.”

Jasmine nodded, shared a look with Rose, and felt her blood tingle. Something big was happening right before their eyes. She hoped Dilly would show up soon.

“I’d better get my tree,” the man said, “before I get aced out. Hold onto a Wazzu ornament for me, will you? I’ll be right back.”

And maybe she should call Colleen into work too.

By noon she had already sold eighteen trees, and people were still coming in. Rose and Dilly and Colleen were busy helping people select and load trees, while Jasmine took money and handed out the free ornaments. People who arrived too late to snap up a snowman in their favorite school colors were disappointed. Some asked her to make more. She agreed at first, but Rose quickly put a stop to it.

“These people are here because they know you only have a few of each ornament. If you make more, they’ll lose their uniqueness and people won’t want them anymore.”

“Just a few more of each,” Jasmine negotiated. “We need to sell these trees.”

“Not at the expense of your artistic integrity,” Rose said. “You’re an artist, Jazz. If you make too many of one kind, you’ll turn it into assembly line work.”

Jasmine winced. It did feel a little like selling her soul to the devil to commercialize her art just to sell trees, but it was Rose’s college fund that was at stake. If they kept selling trees at that morning’s pace for a few more days they would break even, maybe even make a profit. But she couldn’t explain that to Rose, not without confessing that she’d used her college fund to pay for the trees in the first place.

“I love making snowmen,” Jasmine lied.

Rose gave her a knowing look, but agreed to two additional snowmen per school.

Not all the customers wanted snowmen. Some were happy with Santa faces or angels. One woman saw a reindeer and wanted Jasmine to create a sleigh to go with it. After a quick glance at Rose, Jasmine agreed, “But only if you buy another tree.” The woman beamed and took two trees. An elderly man wanted to commission a manger scene. Knowing her limits, Jasmine refused. “Maybe next year,” she said.

“I want a snowflake,” one woman demanded.

“I’m sorry, I don’t have any,” Jasmine said. “I only made those for a couple of days. They went with the first trees.”

A woman behind her said, “I saw one on eBay this morning. It sold for forty dollars.”

Jasmine’s jaw dropped. “The ornament sold for forty dollars?”

“Yes,” the woman said. “There was another one up there going for fifty dollars for the buy-it-now price, but since I live in town and still needed a tree, I decided to come down and get my own ornament. These angels will be worth something someday, I’m sure of it.”

“Fifty dollars isn’t a bad price if you don’t need the tree,” the first woman said. “It’s cheaper than buying the tree and getting the ornament for free.”

Jasmine looked desperately at Rose. She could make a snowflake in a half hour and it would cost less than a dollar in supplies.

Rose stepped forward and shook her head. “Sorry, ma’am. There won’t be any more snowflakes. This lady’s right about the angels, though. They’ll be worth something.”

The woman relented and took an angel.

Finally, in the early afternoon, business slowed and they were able to take a break. Jasmine darted across the street to the gas station and purchased a Sunday paper. Sure enough, right there

on the front page of the regional section was a close-up color photograph of Jasmine's food-color stained fingers holding the Whitworth snowman Zoey had admired so much. A smaller photograph lower down showed a snowflake hanging on someone's tree. Where had they found that? Jasmine wasn't kidding when she said she didn't have any snowflakes left, and she had no idea where the few she had made had ended up.

A sidebar listed other Christmas tree lots, including SleepSafe's lot, and told a little about what made each lot unique. The bulk of the article, though, was about "Jazzy's TRADITIONAL Christmas Trees."

"The owner is young," the article said, "but talented. The trees are not cheap, but the ornaments make them worth the asking price. Proceeds of the sale go to a college fund for Ms. Oliver's sister."

So Zoey had been listening after all.

They sold thirty-five trees that day.

Chapter Fourteen

DARCY DIDN'T GET to see much of Jasmine over the next few days. Ever since the article came out in the paper, Jasmine was too busy. She kept the lot open later than normal, and after that she sat in the bus making candy ornaments until the wee hours of the morning. She didn't bother folding out the bed, since it would have required removing the table and all the candy pieces spread out on it. Instead she curled up on the bench seat in her sleeping bag and slept. In the morning she rushed home, showered, and returned to the lot to open early. There was no time for breakfast in the RV. Darcy visited Jasmine in the bus in the evenings while she worked on ornaments, but it wasn't the same. They could talk, but Jasmine's hands were constantly busy. Even precious eye contact was at a premium.

She couldn't blame Jasmine. For the first time, "Jazzy's TRADITIONAL Christmas Trees" was bringing in money. They all knew it might not last. She had to take advantage of her sudden popularity while she could. Darcy could tell Jasmine was tired. She was overworked and she wasn't sleeping enough, but at the same time she was energized by the money she was making.

"We sold twenty-two trees today," Jasmine announced on Thursday night. On Monday it had been nineteen, on Tuesday it was twenty-one, and seventeen on Wednesday. To Darcy, the numbers seemed low, but Jasmine was thrilled with them. "If we keep this up, we might actually make a profit."

Darcy laughed. "Isn't that the point?"

"It was at first," Jasmine said, "until you stole all our business. Then the point switched to just not crashing and burning."

Both their lots were closed for the night. Jasmine was sitting sideways on the bench seat, her back against the wall of the bus, with her knees bent and her stocking feet tucked under Darcy's thigh. They both had large bowls in their laps and were busy breaking ribbon candy into pieces, red into Jasmine's bowl and white into Darcy's. Later Jasmine would sort the pieces by size and shape into smaller bowls. They had already filled bowls with green and orange pieces, and yellow candy lay in a box awaiting destruction.

Darcy popped a piece of candy into her mouth, sucked, and said, "I'm not sure 'stole' is the right word."

"Whatever," Jasmine said, but her eyes smiled.

Darcy set the bowl on the table, stood up, and leaned over Jasmine for a kiss. Still without speaking, she sat back down, returned the bowl to her lap, and resumed the task of breaking candy. Jasmine tucked her toes underneath Darcy once more.

"Thanks," Jasmine said. "Kissing breaks make the work go faster."

"Yeah, working with candy is not quite as fun as Charlie and the Chocolate Factory made it seem," Darcy said.

Jasmine sighed. "If you want to know the truth, when this is all over, I never want to make another candy ornament as long as I live."

"Really? I thought you loved creating these things."

“I like creating new things,” Jasmine said, “but I don’t like making the same thing over and over. Nobody expects a painter to paint the same picture more than once, so why do people expect me to make the same candy snowman?”

“They’re cute. Everybody wants one.”

“They could make their own. Anybody could make one.”

“Not me,” Darcy said. “I’d end up with candy pieces stuck all over me.”

Jasmine smiled. “Ooh, I’d sure like to see that.”

“Maybe on Christmas I’ll do that for you.”

A gleam lit Jasmine’s eyes. “Maybe you’ll let me decorate you.”

Darcy grinned. “Only if you promise to suck the candy off.”

“Oh, I promise,” Jasmine said.

Darcy sighed. “I miss our mornings.”

Jasmine wriggled her toes under Darcy’s butt. “Me too, but there just isn’t time. I can barely keep up with the ornaments as it is. Besides, you have to leave early anyway to get to the office.”

“I don’t go to the office on Saturday,” Darcy said. “Any chance I can talk you into a sleepover Friday night?” Jasmine looked up, an interested expression on her face. They’d never spent the whole night together, never actually slept together. “You could sleep in a real bed,” Darcy said, enticement in her voice. “Imagine how nice it’ll feel to spread out.”

Jasmine gave a slight smile.

“And wake up in my arms,” Darcy added.

Jasmine’s eyes crinkled. “What about the lot?” she asked.

“We’ll leave the light on in the bus,” Darcy said, “and the radio too. And I’ll have Fabio and Eldon make drive-bys to make sure everything’s okay.”

Jasmine’s smile grew. She didn’t need a lot of persuading. “Okay.”

FRIDAY AFTERNOON, BEFORE the evening Christmas tree rush, Darcy went shopping. She bought a cheesecake, deli meats, bread, three kinds of salad, a coffee cake, and flowers. She didn’t know what Jasmine would be in the mood for, and she wanted to be prepared.

When night arrived, though, it turned out that Jasmine was only in the mood for Darcy. Aside from an appreciative sniff at the flowers, she didn’t seem to notice the spread on the table. She kicked off her shoes, threw her coat on the front seat, grabbed Darcy’s hand, and pulled her into the bedroom.

“It’s been five whole days,” Jasmine said.

Darcy needed no convincing. “Believe me, I know.”

Making love took on a new tone. The five-day wait combined with knowing Jasmine would be staying the entire night gave them urgency, but also freedom to take their time. They were familiar enough with each other’s bodies that there was no nervousness, only passion and pleasure. Darcy imagined sharing her bed with Jasmine for the rest of her life, and the thought brought only good feelings. It was too soon to share them with Jasmine, but Darcy knew. She was in love.

At one particularly passionate point in their lovemaking, Darcy thought she heard a sound from the front of the RV. It was just a small snick. At any other time it would have prompted her to investigate, but her thoughts were blinded by the orgasm that crashed through her in waves, and she didn’t think about that sound again.

A short time later, as they lay in each other's arms, Jasmine surprised her by saying, "Was that a cheesecake I saw on the table?"

"I didn't think you noticed that."

"I didn't, really," Jasmine said, sitting up. "Not then, but I remember it now." She rolled out of bed and grabbed her jeans and shirt. "I'm hungry."

"I hear you." Darcy rose as well. Less modest than Jasmine and still warm from their romp, she simply pulled a t-shirt over her head and let her butt cheeks hang out. "It's time for a break anyway."

"A cheesecake break," Jasmine said.

Darcy pulled two forks and a knife from the drawer and was opening the cupboard for plates when she heard Jasmine say, "Wasn't the door locked?"

Darcy turned. The lock on the door to the RV was in the open position. "When you came in..."

"I locked the door behind me," Jasmine said.

That's when Darcy remembered the snick. Her eyes met Jasmine's. "I did hear a sound."

Jasmine's eyes widened. She reached for her coat, stuck her hand in the pocket, and said, "My keys are gone."

"What?"

Jasmine tossed the coat and was already pushing her feet into her shoes. "My keys are gone!" she shouted. Without bothering to tie the strings, she was out the door.

Darcy lunged for her. "Wait!" She missed, and the door slapped shut behind Jasmine. Darcy scrambled to the back of the RV for her pants and shoes. She had one leg in her jeans when the door opened again.

"The gate's locked," Jasmine called, and Darcy heard Jasmine grab the gate keys from their hook.

"Jasmine, wait for me!"

But again the door slapped shut and Darcy was alone. Her heart thumped with fear at the thought of Jasmine facing whoever took her keys all by herself. She dressed quickly, but by the time she jumped down from the RV, the gate was wide open and there was no sign of Jasmine.

"Shit." Darcy took off running.

Jasmine's lot was dark, the motion-sensor light untriggered, but the gate was wide open.

"Jasmine!"

She heard scuffling and turned in that direction. An "oof" sound was followed by a sharp cry. A row of trees tumbled to the ground, and a dark figure hurtled toward Darcy.

She let the figure pass. It was aiming for the opening in the gate, not her, and the cry had come from behind her. From Jasmine.

"Jasmine!" Darcy rushed forward, trying to locate the source of the cry. "Jazz, where are you?"

"Here." The voice was small and low. Darcy followed it to the fallen trees and found Jasmine on the ground. "He hit me, Darcy."

Darcy dropped to her knee beside her. "Where are you hit, baby? I can't see...oh, where the hell is that light?" She jumped up, located the light pole, and found the electrical cord swinging loose. She plugged it in, and light flooded the lot. She returned to Jasmine, who remained on the ground but was sitting up now, one hand to her face. Darcy knelt again, her trembling hands hovering over Jasmine. "Where are you hurt, Jazz?"

“He hit me,” Jasmine said again. Her hand covered her mouth. Darcy gently pulled Jasmine’s hand away and saw blood. A spasm of sympathy pain rocked her thighs.

Jasmine licked at her lip, which was already swelling, and touched it gingerly with her finger. The next instant, she seemed to forget about her lip. “What did he do?” She thrust Darcy’s hands away. “Let me up.”

Darcy grabbed Jasmine’s arms and pulled her to her feet. Aside from the lip, she seemed unharmed.

“Oh my God,” Jasmine said. “Oh my God, look what he did!”

Darcy looked. The door to the bus was open. Three rubber crates that had contained Jasmine’s Christmas ornament creations had been upended and tossed aside, and the ground outside the bus was covered with broken bits of candy, some of it crushed into sugary dust by someone’s stomping feet. The shoe prints were still visible.

“Darcy!” Jasmine turned to her and, for the first time, tears flooded her eyes. “Darcy, he crushed my ornaments.”

“Oh, Jazz.” Darcy pulled Jasmine into her arms, where she collapsed in sobs. Darcy held her tightly, stroked her hair, and tried to quell the wracking of her body. She looked over Jasmine’s head at the wreckage. The culprit had done a thorough job. It looked as if not a single ornament had survived. Aside from that and the row of fallen trees, which appeared to have occurred by accident when Jasmine struggled with the assailant, there was no other damage. The candy ornaments were the target.

Finally Jasmine quieted and pulled away. “Why would someone do that?” she asked, her voice shaking and her eyes wounded. “Who hates me so much?”

“Someone’s jealous,” Darcy said. “It wasn’t personal.”

“I made those ornaments,” Jasmine said. “It’s personal.” She licked at her lip again and rubbed it with her thumb. “I left my phone at your place.” Her voice was still clogged with tears. “Do you have yours? We have to call the police.”

“There’s no hurry,” Darcy said. “How’s your lip?”

Jasmine touched it again. “Swollen,” she said, “but it’s not bleeding much.”

Darcy moved to the bus. Jasmine’s keys were still in the door. She pulled them out and grabbed the door handle to slide it shut.

“Wait, you’re going to mess up the fingerprints.”

Darcy shook her head and continued closing the door. “The police won’t take fingerprints for something like this.”

“Why not?”

“It would have to be a pretty major property crime for them to do that sort of investigation,” Darcy said. “From their point of view, this is just candy.”

Tears erupted again in Jasmine’s eyes. “How can I sell trees without any ornaments?”

“Oh, Jazz, I’m sorry.” Darcy put her arm around Jasmine, who dropped her head to Darcy’s shoulder and wept again. “Let’s go back to the RV. You’re tired and you’re cold. You don’t even have a coat. We’ll figure something out in the morning.”

“What if he comes back?”

“He won’t be back. He did what he came to do. There’s nothing here now but trees.”

They locked the bus and the gate anyway and walked slowly back to the RV. The gate to SleepSafe was still wide open, but nothing was disturbed. They undressed and crawled into bed. The adrenaline rush that had hit Jasmine left her exhausted, and she fell asleep almost immediately.

Darcy lay awake. Jasmine had been too tired and upset to protest much about calling the police before she fell asleep, but it might be a different story in the morning. Darcy watched Jasmine sleep, ached at the sight of her puffy lip, and wondered. What the hell was she going to do now?

Chapter Fifteen

JASMINE WOKE, YAWNED, felt pain at her mouth, and sat up abruptly, recalling instantly the events of the night before. She scrambled from the bed and went to the front of the RV. Her movements woke Darcy.

“What are you doing?” Darcy called. “Come back to bed. It’s early.”

Jasmine returned to the bedroom, her phone in her hand. “Darcy, we have to call the police.”

Darcy sat up.

“I don’t know what we were thinking last night,” Jasmine said. “We should have called right away. Is it too late to call 911? I think it is. Who should I call instead? What’s the number for Crime Check?”

“Don’t call,” Darcy said. “They won’t do anything. It’s just candy.”

“No, it’s not,” Jasmine said. “That guy committed all kinds of crimes. Trespassing, and destruction of property, and burglary, and he assaulted me! We should have called the police right away. They would have come out if they knew he hit me.” Jasmine pressed the search function of her phone and typed “police”.

Darcy leaned over and put her hand on Jasmine’s phone. “Don’t call the police, Jasmine.”

“Why not?” Jasmine looked up and met Darcy’s eyes. The seriousness of her expression startled Jasmine, and a horrible thought occurred. “Darcy, are you wanted by the police?”

Darcy laughed like she was amused, but not like she was happy. “No, I’m not wanted. I wouldn’t be in the business I’m in now if I had a police record.”

“Then what is it? Why don’t you want me to call the police?”

“I know who did it,” Darcy said. “I saw her.”

“You saw...you saw who hit me?” Jasmine asked.

“I don’t think she meant to hurt you,” Darcy said.

“She? Who was it?” But even as she said it, Jasmine knew. She dropped to the bed. “It was Caitlin, wasn’t it?”

Darcy said nothing, but her expression confirmed it.

Jasmine pulled her phone out from under Darcy’s hand. “Then let’s report her. They don’t even need to investigate now, they can just arrest her.”

“Jasmine, no,” Darcy said. “We can handle this without the police being involved. She’s just a kid.”

“Are you kidding me?” Jasmine asked. “She’s a kid who just destroyed my livelihood! She ruined Rose’s chance to go to a good college. I can’t sell my trees without those ornaments. And she hit me! She’s vicious.”

“She’s not vicious,” Darcy said. “She’s jealous. She shouldn’t have done it. It was stupid, and I’ll talk to her, and I’ll make her reimburse you for the loss of your sales, somehow. But if you call the police...the thing is, she’s already had a couple of run-ins with the law.”

“All the more reason why this needs to be reported,” Jasmine said. “She obviously can’t control herself. She needs to be in jail.”

“Come on, you know that won’t solve the problem. It’ll only make things worse. You need to give her a second chance.”

“A second chance!” Jasmine couldn’t believe what Darcy was saying. “It sounds like she’s had a second chance, two or three times. If she were a black girl, how many chances do you think she’d get? She’d be in prison already.”

“That may be true,” Darcy said, “but sending Caitlin to jail won’t all of the sudden give justice to black people.”

Jasmine felt like she’d been punched in the gut. She waved weakly. “Hello? Do you remember who you’re talking to? Black woman here?”

Darcy sighed heavily and tried to grasp Jasmine’s hands, but Jasmine pulled them away. “Jasmine, I know, but that’s not what this is about. It’s not—”

“Isn’t it?” Jasmine asked. “It doesn’t seem to matter to you that my business was destroyed, or that I got hit in the face. Justice for me, the black woman, doesn’t matter, just as long as Caitlin doesn’t have to suffer.”

“It matters to me, Jasmine,” Darcy said, blinking rapidly as if holding back tears. “You matter to me so much, and I hate what Caitlin did to you. It hurts me to think how she hurt you. It’s just that I think there’s a better way to handle it. Please, Jasmine, don’t call the police.” Tears spilled down her cheeks.

Jasmine slumped, defeated, her heart crumbling in her chest. She was unmoved by Darcy’s tears. They weren’t for her. She’d allowed herself to imagine, for a few wonderful days, that Darcy was not too good to be true, but once again that had proven to be false. She felt like all the blood had been drained from her body.

“Fine,” Jasmine said, “I won’t call the police.”

Darcy sighed and smiled at her victory, but her smile faltered when Jasmine got off the bed and pulled on her jeans. “Are you leaving?”

“I’ve got some cleaning up to do at the lot,” Jasmine said.

“Oh, that’s right.” Darcy threw back the covers. “I’ll come help you.”

“No.”

Darcy froze halfway out of bed and slowly dropped back to it. “Jasmine? Don’t be mad.”

Jasmine pulled her sweatshirt over her head and looked at Darcy, hardly able to believe she didn’t realize the impact of her words. “I’m not mad, Darcy. I’m disappointed. I’m sad. And I’m finished.”

“Finished?”

“You win,” Jasmine said. “I told you I won’t call the police, and I won’t. But if you think I can be in a relationship with you now that I know how little I matter to you, you’re crazy.”

Darcy’s jaw dropped and her eyes grew wide. “No, Jasmine, don’t leave! You matter more than anything to me, more than anyone ever has or could, I swear it. I’m falling...” Darcy stopped, swallowed, and more tears spilled from her eyes. “I’ve fallen in love with you, Jazz.”

Jasmine didn’t believe it, but she couldn’t help but hope. She looked up from tying her shoes. “Then prove it.”

“How?”

“I won’t call the police, but you can. You’re the one who saw her, after all.”

Darcy shook her head. “I can’t. I can’t do that.”

Jasmine wasn’t surprised. She’d already accepted reality. It was no more than what she’d expected, after all. She finished tying her shoes and reached for her coat. “Well, there you are

then," she said. "If you change your mind, you know what to do. Otherwise," she gave Darcy a sad smile, "thanks for some fun times."
She left.

Chapter Sixteen

DARCY SAT UNMOVING for several minutes trying to wrap her mind around what had just happened.

Was it over? Just like that?

They'd only known each other three weeks, but Darcy had already become accustomed to the idea that Jasmine was the person she would spend the rest of her life with. She knew it would take some time for Jasmine to come around to the idea, but it was a settled matter in Darcy's mind. It couldn't have ended so soon, not over something like this.

She tried to take a deep breath, but it was shaky. Her lungs wouldn't fully expand, as if they were overcome by shock.

"You know what to do," Jasmine had said, and she'd looked so sad when she said it, and so beautiful, despite the puffy lip that still made Darcy wince.

Yes, Darcy knew what to do, but she couldn't do it. She couldn't report Caitlin to the police. There had to be a way, some way other than turning Caitlin in, to get Jasmine back.

Well, there was one thing that might work. She could tell Jasmine the truth.

Darcy reeled away from that thought. It was too hard. She couldn't even think about it without a knot of shame burning in her gut. She couldn't do it.

There was something she could do, though. It wouldn't be enough, but it was something. She reached for her clothes.

CAITLIN DIDN'T HAVE the nerve to come to work that day. Darcy wasn't surprised. It was dark when Caitlin brushed past her in Jasmine's lot the night before, but Darcy had recognized her. Caitlin must have recognized Darcy as well.

Darcy left Wesley in charge of the register, something she normally wouldn't do on a busy Saturday, but she really didn't care much about what happened at the Christmas tree lot that day. She only cared about Jasmine.

Caitlin was one of the lucky ones; a homeless kid who'd managed to avoid getting involved in drugs and prostitution. She had a GED and a steady work history of performing odd jobs, including the job at the Christmas tree lot. Darcy had hoped Caitlin would be able to get a regular job as a cashier after her stint at SleepSafe, but now she wasn't so sure.

Caitlin lived in the basement apartment of an old house in a lowrent area of Spokane commonly referred to as Felony Flats. She shared the small living space with Trudy, a girl who'd managed to get off the streets when she got pregnant at the age of 16 and state services kicked in. They both lived off food stamps, Trudy's TANF grant, and whatever wages Caitlin managed to bring in.

Darcy parked on the street, walked up the ragged sidewalk, and knocked on the door of apartment B. She heard an urgent voice from behind the door saying, “Don’t open it.” The speaker was ignored. The door opened and Trudy stood there smiling shyly.

“Hi Darcy.”

Darcy smiled back, but it must have been grim, since Trudy’s face fell. She stepped back and Darcy walked in. The apartment was minimally tidy. It would pass muster with Child Protective Services, but hardly anyone else. A chubby infant wearing a blue fuzzy one-piece sat in the middle of the floor chewing on a plastic squirrel. A steady line of drool fell from his mouth to his lap. Behind him stood Caitlin, her arms crossed defensively in front of her chest. Their eyes met.

Darcy was transported back in time. The expression on Caitlin’s face mirrored what Darcy had felt at that crucial moment fifteen years ago when she’d been confronted with her own miserable deeds. Defiance, certainly, and anger, but also guilt and shame and misery. And underneath it all, buried so deeply Darcy hadn’t even been aware of it, was a plea for help.

Part of Darcy didn’t care. She felt the sting of Jasmine’s anger and disappointment, and she wanted Caitlin to suffer. The other part of her knew better.

“Um, I’m going to take Gerund for a walk,” Trudy said nervously. “I’m sure you have things to talk about.”

Darcy watched as Trudy stuffed the baby into a snowsuit. Did the girl realize she’d named her child after a part of speech? She grabbed her coat and an umbrella stroller and slipped out the door.

Darcy looked again at Caitlin. Her eyes were swollen, like she’d been crying, which only made Darcy think of Jasmine again. Jasmine’s eyes had been swollen this morning too, because of Caitlin. But she couldn’t let herself think of Jasmine. It made her too angry, too likely to make a wrong move.

Darcy felt like she was balancing on one foot on a pinnacle between Caitlin’s redemption and her destruction. One wobble and Caitlin would veer off in the wrong direction and possibly be lost forever. Her previous brushes with the law had been stupid kid stuff. Shoplifting, trespass, and she’d once stolen a cell phone so that she could call her girlfriend. Minor things, really, for a street kid. Last night she’d committed real crimes—burglary, destruction of property, and assault, on Jasmine of all people. No, don’t think of Jasmine.

Darcy had been where Caitlin was. She’d been handled masterfully, but not gently, and it had made all the difference in her life. Darcy was aware that the words she chose in the next few moments could make all the difference for Caitlin.

“You will fix what you did,” she said firmly, but she kept the anger from her voice.

A tremor crossed Caitlin’s face, which had been rigid with tension, and Darcy decided she’d made the right decision. Caitlin may have thought there was no way to fix what she did, and to some extent she was probably right, but all was not lost.

For her, anyway. But Darcy would not think of Jasmine.

“You will pay Jasmine for every tree she doesn’t sell. You will pay her for the cost of the candy and all the supplies. You will pay her ten dollars an hour for every hour she spent making the ornaments you destroyed, and you will pay her ten dollars an hour for every hour she spends cleaning up the mess you made. Yes, it’s a lot of money,” Darcy said, responding to the shocked look on Caitlin’s face, “and it’s going to take you a long time to pay it all back, but you’ll do it.”

The tremors on Caitlin’s face increased.

“There’s no way you can make it up to Jasmine for hitting her in the face,” Darcy said, and the last few words came out so sharply she had to take a steadying breath. “But you will beg her for forgiveness.”

Tears fell from Caitlin’s eyes. “I didn’t mean to hit her,” she choked out.

Darcy ignored her. “Consider these the terms of your probation. The statute of limitations in this state is seven years.” It was three, Darcy thought, but Caitlin wouldn’t know that. “I’ll be watching you. If you go even one month without making a payment to Jasmine before it’s all paid off, I’ll go to the police and tell them what you did. You’re not a minor anymore, Caitlin, you’re eighteen years old, and what you did is a felony. You’ll go to prison.”

Caitlin gave a gasping sob. “I’m sorry, Darcy.”

“And this last thing is not a term of your probation,” Darcy said. “It’s just some advice on how to grow up. Stop trying to hurt the people you care about, Caitlin. I know why you did what you did to Jasmine. It’s inexcusable, but I understand it. But you didn’t just hurt her. You hurt me more than you can—” Darcy stopped. Her throat was too choked to speak. She turned and left before breaking down completely.

Chapter Seventeen

JASMINE ACHED ALL over. Whether it was from having been knocked to the ground or from crying so hard the night before or from the heartache that spread throughout her being, she didn't know, but her entire body felt bruised. Picking up the fallen trees was a chore, but it was pleasant compared to trying to pick up the remnants of candy ornaments from the dirt. It had frosted overnight. The candy pieces had become wet and then froze to the ground. She gave up and left the pieces spread out on the ground like a sticky mosaic floor.

The thought of the customers who would be showing up that day gave her no energy. They would expect a candy ornament, and she had none to give them. She had nothing on her lot but too many overpriced trees. And her mouth hurt. She sucked her lip, blinked back tears, and wondered what to tell Rose when she arrived. She tried not to think of Darcy.

She would sleep in her own bed that night, Jasmine decided. There was no need to stay on the lot, since there was nothing to protect any longer. Dilly could have his bus back. She would not be spending tonight with Darcy. Darcy would not be coming over on Christmas morning. Darcy would be spending Christmas morning with her homeless kids. Kids like Caitlin. Kids who mattered more to her than Jasmine did. Jasmine bit her lip, winced, and remembered she wasn't going to think about Darcy.

She wrestled the propane heater onto the wagon. She would have Dilly wheel it back to SleepSafe when he showed up for his shift that afternoon. She didn't want any borrowed equipment hanging around reminding her of Darcy. She had no way of removing the motion sensing light without a ladder, but she resolved not to plug it in that night. She wondered if Darcy would be watching.

She was on the sidewalk trying to pry off the "Free Ornament with Every Tree" sign when the city bus stopped across the street and Rose hopped off. She dodged traffic and ran across the street.

"Why are you taking that off?" Rose asked.

"The ornaments are gone," Jasmine said. The ornament addition was attached to the rest of the sign with glue and it would not pop off. She gave up trying to pry it and gave a hard yank. It came loose, bringing a swath of the original painted sign with it.

"Hey," Rose said, "be careful with that. I wanted to keep that sign. What happened to the ornaments?"

Jasmine looked up.

Rose's eyes widened. "My God, Jazz, what happened to your mouth?" She glanced into the lot. "What's been going on here?"

"Someone broke into the lot last night," Jasmine said.

"Oh my God! How could they do that with you right there in the bus?"

"I wasn't in the bus," Jasmine said, returning to the lot. "I was visiting Darcy. When I came back, the gate was open and someone was in here stomping on the ornaments." She waved a

hand at the candy-strewn ground in front of the bus. “I yelled at her to stop, and she rushed at me and knocked me over. Then Darcy showed up and she ran off.”

“She? It was a woman? Who was it?”

“That girl from SleepSafe,” Jasmine said. “The one with all the studs in her face.”

“Caitlin?”

“You know her?”

“Sort of. We went to the same middle school back when I lived with Dad. She was a grade ahead of me. Did you call the police?”

“No. I wanted to, but,” Jasmine shook her head and let bitterness creep into her voice, “Darcy wants me to give her a second chance.”

“Oh.” Rose put her backpack in the front of Dilly’s bus. “How did she get in the bus? Did she break the lock or anything?”

“No, she had the keys. She must have been on Darcy’s lot when we went into the RV.” Jasmine tried to word the next part carefully. “Darcy was, uh, showing me something in the back, and Caitlin sneaked in and grabbed the keys out of my coat pocket.”

“I see,” Rose said, and she looked as if she did. “Did you know Caitlin’s a lesbian too?”

“I thought she probably was. I know she has a crush on Darcy.”

Rose nodded. “That explains it.”

“Explains what?”

“Well, it’s pretty obvious how Darcy feels about you,” Rose said. “Caitlin had to have seen it. She’s jealous. She took it out on you by crushing your ornaments. She was pretty wild in middle school.”

“Well, being jealous is no excuse, and besides, Darcy doesn’t feel anything for me after all.”

“I didn’t say it was an excuse, just an explanation. And come on, Darcy’s crazy about you.”

“Then why would she take her side against mine?”

Rose looked surprised. “Did she?”

“Why else wouldn’t she let me call the police?”

Rose shrugged. “Maybe it’s just what she said. Maybe she wants to give Caitlin a second chance.”

“She’s already had chances,” Jasmine said. “Darcy said she’s had run-ins with the law before. Do you think she’d get all those second chances if she was black?”

“Oh.” Rose slumped onto the stool. “Oh, Jazz, I’m sorry. It’s bringing all those feelings up again, huh?”

Jasmine felt the sting of tears and realized Rose was right. This was about more than candy ornaments and Caitlin’s jealousy and Darcy. It brought up all the old hurts, the disappointments and rejections and the bitterness about her father being sent to prison.

“But you don’t think Darcy would treat Caitlin any differently if she was black, do you?” Rose asked.

Jasmine shrugged. “I don’t know. There’s no way to know.”

“Yes there is,” Rose said. “We know because it’s Darcy. She wouldn’t do that. You know she wouldn’t.”

Jasmine swallowed, touched her tongue to her lip, and wondered if she did know that. Rose seemed so sure of Darcy. Jasmine wanted to be, but it was hard.

“I have to tell you something, Rose,” Jasmine said, and her voice shook.

Rose looked dismayed. “There’s more?”

Jasmine stared at the ground and felt sick to her stomach at the blow she was about to give her sister. “You never asked where I got the money to buy the trees and rent the lot and everything.”

“Oh,” Rose said softly, but Jasmine didn’t look up.

“I used—” Jasmine broke off, choked by sudden tears, but she forced herself to continue. “I used your money, Rose.”

“I don’t have any money,” Rose said.

“Yes, you do. Your college money,” Jasmine said, finally daring to look up. “From that CD we bought with the money from Mom’s insurance.”

“That was your money as much as it was mine,” Rose said.

“No, we agreed it was for your college fund, remember?”

Rose shrugged. “I was eleven. I agreed with whatever you said. Is it all gone?”

“Not all of it,” Jasmine said. “But we’ve lost a couple thousand dollars.”

“So I can still go to community college,” Rose said, “or maybe I’ll take out a student loan.”

“No,” Jasmine wailed. “You’ll have to make payments on it for the rest of your life.”

“You’re being melodramatic, Jazz,” Rose said. “Lots of people don’t have college funds and they still manage to go to college, if they really want to. And I still have another year to try for scholarships. Stop worrying about it, okay?”

Jasmine sniffed and wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her coat. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

Rose gave a little laugh. “I sort of already guessed. Where else would you get that kind of money?”

A woman appeared at the entrance to the lot, and Jasmine’s heart leapt. Then the woman stepped forward and, as quickly as her heart had risen, it sank. It wasn’t Darcy. It was Caitlin.

The girl looked terrible. Her eyes were swollen, her nose was red, and her skin was white as frost. She stepped forward, opened her mouth, and tears poured from her eyes. “I’m s-s-sorry.” Her voice shuddered like she was riding a bicycle over railroad tracks. “I d-ddidn’t mean to h-h-hurt you. I was s-s-stupid. I shouldn’t have done it.” She took another step forward and dropped a handful of cash on the table. “It’s all the money I h-h-have. I’ll bring more a-a-after I get paid. I’ll pay for everything.”

Jasmine ignored the money and glared at Caitlin. Rose stood, leaned over Jasmine, and counted the bills. “Twenty-seven dollars.”

“I get paid on Christmas Eve,” Caitlin said, wiping her face with her hand and gaining control of her voice. “I’ll cash it at Fast Cash and give it to you. At least, if it’s all right, if I could just keep enough to buy a present for my roommate’s little boy. I already told her I would.”

Jasmine still didn’t speak, and it was left to Rose to respond. She sorted through the bills, picked some out, and handed them to Caitlin. “Here’s thirteen dollars back. Give Jasmine half your paycheck on Christmas Eve and half your check every time you get paid until everything’s paid off.”

Caitlin took the money and started crying again. “Thank you. Let me know how long it took you to make those ornaments. I’ll pay you for your time.”

Rose gave a short laugh. “That’s impossible. Jasmine’s an artist. It’s not about how much time it took to make them. Those ornaments are irreplaceable.”

“I know.” Caitlin looked at Jasmine. “I didn’t mean what I said that time, when I said they were lame. They really were beautiful. I’m glad Darcy sent that newspaper lady over here to do that article. People just needed to see what you were doing.”

Jasmine spoke for the first time since Caitlin entered the lot. "Darcy sent her here?"

Caitlin nodded. "Yeah, I heard her. That lady's done a couple of articles about SleepSafe, so she came to see how our lot was doing. Darcy told her she really needed to write about what you were doing here instead."

Jasmine glanced at the propane heater, still perched in the little wagon. She could return the heater and the security light, but it appeared she couldn't return all Darcy's favors no matter how much she wanted to.

"Well, anyway." Caitlin backed away toward the gate. "I am sorry, really, really sorry. And, uh, Merry Christmas."

"Are you going to forgive her?" Rose asked when Caitlin was gone.

"No," Jasmine said.

"Why not?"

"Do you really think she came over here and apologized of her own free will?" Jasmine asked. "Darcy made her do it, I'm sure of it."

"So?"

"Remember that time you shoplifted gum from Summerson's?" Jasmine asked. "And I made you take it back and apologize? You cried just like that."

"But when I said I was sorry, I really meant it."

"Yeah, well, you were seven," Jasmine said. "Caitlin is eighteen. She's not getting off that easily."

"What about Darcy?"

Jasmine's heart twisted. She closed her eyes against the pain and clenched her teeth, since it hurt too much to clench her lips, and said, "She's not getting off that easily either."

Chapter Eighteen

IT WAS CHRISTMAS Eve, the most melancholy day of the year. The bouncy castle had been deflated and hauled away. Santa's throne was gone, as was the popcorn popper. The propane heaters had been returned to Rental City, including the one Jasmine had returned via Rose's little red wagon. The RV had been driven off and returned to its normal home behind the SleepSafe Security building. The snow-flocking equipment, chainsaws, tree stands, and all the other equipment were already in storage. Even the port-a-potties were gone. Nothing remained on the lot except for a few scraggly trees.

The kids all had the day off, even Caitlin, who had been working as many hours as Darcy would let her. She'd received an itemized bill from Jasmine, though Darcy suspected Rose was the one who had created it. It included the cost of the candy supplies, all the unsold trees, rental fees for Dilly's bus, and the "appraised value" of the destroyed candy ornaments. Attached were printouts from e-bay of Jasmine's ornaments for sale, the prices having skyrocketed now that they were no longer available. At Caitlin's minimum wage salary, even working full-time, it would take her six months or more to pay it off. Caitlin was surprisingly cheerful about it. She had the attitude of someone determined to fix what she broke. Darcy had no way of knowing if it would last, no way of knowing if her gamble to save Caitlin from herself would work, but she'd had no choice. Even though she'd lost Jasmine because of it.

Darcy shied away from the thought of Jasmine. The hurt was still too raw.

She opened the gate, pocketed the lock, and left the gate wide open. The fence would come down after Christmas. She lifted the same white sign she put up every Christmas Eve and threaded the wire through the chain link. "FREE TREES" it said, in plain black print. It was effective, but no work of art, nothing like what Jasmine would have done.

She had to stop thinking about Jasmine. Christmas was always a hard time for Darcy, but she had never been as depressed by the holiday as she was this year, not even when she was fifteen years old and fresh on the streets. At least then she'd had the hope of a better future someday. Now a happy future was something she couldn't even imagine, not without Jasmine.

She gave one last twist to the second wire, turned, and saw a small figure standing on the corner watching her. Her heart clamored in her chest, but only briefly, until she saw that the figure was not Jasmine.

"Hi Darcy."

"Hi Rose. How are you?"

"I'm okay."

Darcy had wondered if she'd see Rose again. She'd already had two other visitors from "Jazzy's TRADITIONAL Christmas Trees" in the last two days. Dilly had shown up on Sunday dragging the little red wagon behind him. Darcy's heart sank when she saw what it held. Every bit of equipment she'd loaned Jasmine was balanced on the wagon. Except for the security light, Darcy noticed. Jasmine probably couldn't reach it without Darcy's ladder.

"Just like in the movies," Dilly said. "I've been ordered to return all the romantic gifties."

“She could have kept them,” Darcy said.

“Oh no. Nary a piece of security equipment that has touched your hands will ever touch hers,” Dilly said. “What did you do to her, girlfriend? That is one pissed off little girl.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Darcy said.

Dilly tapped his lip in the same spot where Jasmine had been hit. “You didn’t do this, did you?”

“God, no!” Darcy said. “Dilly, I wouldn’t hurt a hair on her head, I swear I wouldn’t.”

Dilly nodded. “I didn’t think so, but I had to make sure. Because if you did,” he posed like a karate expert, “I’d have to hurt you.”

Darcy smiled.

“Don’t laugh. I’m skinny, but I’m deadly. Still,” he dropped the pose, “I’d rather not get mussed.”

On Monday it was Colleen who stopped by. She was more direct than Dilly. “What happened between you two? You can tell me.”

“If Jasmine didn’t tell you, I don’t think I should,” Darcy said.

“Of course you should. Jasmine never tells me anything. I only found out a week ago that she was a virgin. Before you, anyway.”

“Wha-at?”

“See? She doesn’t tell anybody anything.”

“You mean she’d never been with a woman before?” Darcy asked.

“I mean she’d never been with anybody before.”

“Holy crap.”

“Yeah,” Colleen said. “Maybe she’s just freaked out about the sex. You should talk to her.”

Darcy considered it and shook her head. She was shocked to learn that she was Jasmine’s first, but their problem was not about sex.

Now her third visitor from Jasmine’s lot in three days stepped forward. She held a wrapped package. “I brought you a Christmas present.”

Darcy caught her breath, and Rose picked up on her unasked question.

“It’s from me,” Rose said. “Go ahead and open it.”

Darcy smiled and took the package. Even though it wasn’t from Jasmine, she couldn’t help but feel some excitement in opening the gift.

Darcy wasn’t close to many people, and Rose had come to mean a lot to her. A gift from someone she truly cared about was rare. Under the red and white striped wrapping was a box. She opened the box, and nestled inside was one of Jasmine’s candy ornaments, a snowman wearing a University of Washington Huskies letterman jacket.

“How did you—I thought they were all crushed.”

“I saw how you looked at it that day,” Rose said, grinning at Darcy’s reaction. “I knew you wanted it. When Jasmine told me you were coming over on Christmas morning, I sneaked it away and wrapped it for you.” Rose laughed. “I couldn’t wait to see Jasmine’s face when you opened it and she saw I broke the rules for you. Then she told me you weren’t coming over after all, so I decided to deliver it.”

Darcy felt tears sting her eyes. She was touched by Rose’s thoughtfulness, but she doubted she would ever be able to take the ornament out of the box. How could she, when it would only remind her of Jasmine and the Christmas that might have been?

“Thank you, Rose. This means a lot to me.” She put the top back on the box. “Is she making any more ornaments?”

“No, she’s given up on that. She says they’re too fragile. She’s been painting the last couple of days.”

“Are you still selling trees over there?”

“We’re trying,” Rose said. “We’ve slashed the prices to practically nothing, but Jazz won’t give them away for free, like you are.”

“She can send the bill for them to Caitlin,” Darcy said. “You know she would have sold all those trees if she’d had ornaments to go with them.”

“She doesn’t think Caitlin’s going to come through. She did bring her payment by today, though. Jasmine never saw that bill, by the way.” Rose grinned. “She thinks it’s half that.”

Darcy laughed. “I wondered.”

“So she’s still trying to sell the last of the trees. She can’t stand the thought of missing out on ten or twenty dollars that might go into my college fund.”

“She wants the best for you.”

“Yeah.” Rose sighed. “It’s a burden sometimes.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, she has this impression of me as being a sweet, innocent, perfect kid. I try to act like I am so I don’t disappoint her, but I’m not.”

“You’re not?”

Rose shook her head. “You know what these street kids are like?”

Darcy nodded. She knew.

“Well, I spent a lot of time hanging out with those kids when I was living with Dad. I did things when I was twelve and thirteen years old that Jasmine can’t even imagine. She’s so innocent. Sometimes I feel like I’m the grown-up and she’s the kid. I worry about going away to college and leaving her here all by herself.”

Suddenly Darcy worried about it too. It was one thing for Darcy to be alone. She was used to it. But the thought of Jasmine being alone, being lonely, was unbearable.

“How is she doing?” Darcy asked. “Really?”

Rose gave her a solemn look. “She’s sad.”

Darcy was sorry, but pleased at the same time. It wouldn’t be fair if she were the only one suffering. “Is she still mad at me?”

“She won’t talk about it. I wish—”

“What, Rose?”

“I wish you’d go over there and knock some sense into her. I know she cares about you. She’s just being stubborn.”

Darcy shook her head. “She won’t see me again unless I turn Caitlin in to the police, and I can’t do that.”

“Maybe I should tell her some of the things I’ve done,” Rose said. “Maybe then she won’t be so hard on Caitlin.”

“No, don’t do that,” Darcy said quickly. Jasmine already suffered enough with concern about Rose. Darcy couldn’t bear the thought of adding to it.

But Rose’s words breathed life into the idea Darcy had been wrestling with ever since Jasmine walked out of her RV, the idea that Darcy had rejected immediately as too risky. She was scared. She was afraid of Jasmine’s disappointment, afraid of destroying any chance she had of earning her forgiveness. As the days passed, though, she realized she didn’t have much chance of forgiveness anyway.

She had nothing to lose, really, and it would be better for Jasmine to be disappointed in Darcy—more disappointed than she already was, that is—than for her to be disappointed in Rose. Besides, there was a chance, a slight chance, that it could make a difference.

She still didn't have the nerve to tell Jasmine the truth herself, but maybe there was another way.

Chapter Nineteen

IT WAS STILL mid-afternoon, but it felt later. The clouds were heavy and dark. It was not as cold as it had been the last couple of weeks, but the dampness in the air made it feel colder. Jasmine sat on her metal folding chair and hunched over the table to put the finishing touches on her “FREE TREES” sign. She’d drawn a small brigade of trees with feet for trunks and expressions of glee running through the gate to escape the confines of the chain link. She wrote a tiny “the” between the two other words so that it said, “FREE the TREES!” She leaned back and considered adding wings to a couple of trees so they could fly over the top of the fence.

She’d been alone for hours. She’d given Rose a shopping list and the debit card and sent her off to prepare for their Christmas breakfast feast. Jasmine tried to look forward to it. She should never have asked Darcy to join them. She wouldn’t feel her absence so strongly if she hadn’t anticipated her being there in the first place.

She’d sold one tree that morning for fifteen dollars. Since then, no one had even wandered into the lot. There was no reason for Jasmine to still be there, but what else was there to do? Her heart ached. It made her feel better, slightly, to think that Darcy might be only one block away from her. That was silly, though. Darcy would have closed up shop hours ago.

It had been three days, and she hadn’t heard a word from her. She was filled alternately with anger, misery, and remorse. It was her fault they weren’t together, after all. Jasmine was the one who’d ended it, not Darcy, and several times a day she wished she hadn’t. She would pull her phone out of her pocket, prepare to call or text and ask Darcy to meet her, but then she would think of her mother.

Rose and Jasmine’s mother had craved love so badly she’d put up with treatment from men that made Jasmine, even as a little girl, cringe with shame. She’d vowed never to let someone she loved treat her like that, and she was trying to raise Rose with the same brand of self-respect. How could she invite Darcy back into her life, knowing that she didn’t respect Jasmine enough to seek justice on her behalf? That’s when the anger would resurface, and Jasmine would slip her phone back into her pocket. Darcy had made her choice, and it wasn’t Jasmine.

She was gazing up at the twinkle lights, which were still strung over the lot, and trying not to hurt when a car pulled in and parked where Dilly’s bus used to be. It was a newer sedan, not a car someone would likely put a tree on, and Jasmine stood up, curious. A woman got out. She was tall and heavy, probably in her seventies, with mahogany skin, thick gray curls, large glasses, and loose jowls.

She slammed the car door.

“Are you Jasmine?”

“Yes. I’m sorry, we’re out of ornaments.”

“That’s not why I’m here.” The woman walked over and sat on the stool. It wobbled, and she stood back up. “This is too flimsy. Trade me.”

The woman was startling, but she had a commanding presence. Jasmine handed over the folding chair and took the stool.

“That’s better,” the woman said. “We need to have a talk, you and I.”

“We do?”

“I need to tell you a story.”

“Uh...have we met?”

The woman held out her hand. “My name’s Maura. Pleased to meet you. Now you just sit tight and listen. I never told this story before, and I never will again. It’s yours to do with what you will. Now before I sold it, I had a little business. It was my husband’s and mine first, but after he died it was all mine. The Lamp Post. We sold lamps and light fixtures. Nice stuff. It was just a mom and pop business, but it made good enough money for us.”

Jasmine hooked her heels on the rung of the stool, rocked it a bit in the dirt, and wondered where this was going. Had the woman stopped at the wrong lot? But she’d known Jasmine’s name.

“There was a time about fifteen years ago a little crime spree hit this city. Someone was breaking into businesses, stealing things and doing petty vandalism. Only small businesses, the kind that weren’t big enough to have alarms or fancy security systems.”

Jasmine stopped rocking.

“There was never a lot of damage, but always some, usually just one thing, and it was intentional, you could just tell. Not like breaking a window to get in, but a mirror or a dish or something smashed just for the fun of it. Little businesses on both sides of me got hit, so I figured it was just a matter of time ‘til it was my turn, so I set up a video camera and started sleeping in the back room. And sure enough, only a few nights later, she broke in.”

“She?” Jasmine asked faintly.

Maura nodded. “I heard her break in and I turned on the video camera. I didn’t plan on confronting her. I only meant to record her and turn it over to the police. I didn’t have any cash on the premises, and I figured I could afford one broken lamp. But that was before I heard the smashing sound, and I knew it wasn’t a lamp.” Maura paused, sucked her lips, and looked pensive. “I had a daughter once, just a few years older than Darcy.”

Jasmine’s heart thumped at the sound of Darcy’s name.

“Shelly was an artist, like you,” Maura said. “She couldn’t make a living at it. Well, who can? But she was good. One piece she made I kept in the store, a sculpture of a mother and child. I liked to look at it during the day and remember her the way she was when she made it, when she was happy. She wasn’t always happy. Hardly ever, really. She’d probably be diagnosed with something today, but back then we thought she was just moody, or maybe on drugs. She killed herself when she was twenty-three.”

Jasmine caught her breath. “Oh, I’m sorry.”

“Of course, Darcy didn’t know any of that when she smashed the sculpture. She had to have known it meant something to me, though. Maybe it meant something to her too,” Maura said, as if it was a new idea. “Maybe that’s why she smashed it instead of a lamp. I don’t know. I doubt she knows either. Hey, don’t cry. The story picks up from here.”

“I’m sorry, I just—” Jasmine wiped her face on her sleeve and waved Maura on.

Maura nodded. “You should have seen her then. She was just a kid, but she’d been living on the streets for a couple of years already, and she was tough. Skinny and fierce. Angry, you know? But I was angry too. I wanted to smash her little face in, I was so mad. The rational side of me said, no, just call the police and let them handle it. I had more than enough evidence to send her away. But then something stopped me. Some look in her face, in her eyes. Desperation. A plea. I don’t know. It felt like, well, it sounds crazy, probably is, but it felt like my daughter

was looking at me, through Darcy's eyes. Like she was trying to tell me something. I knew if I called the police, it would be the beginning of the end for that kid. So I put her on probation instead."

Jasmine wasn't expecting that. "Probation?"

"You bet. My own private probation. I told her about my videotape and told her I'd be watching her. I let her know that if she ever made one wrong move, I'd turn it over to the police in a second. I told her my conditions." Maura counted them on her fingers. "Get her GED, get a job, get off the streets, and stay out of trouble. I didn't tell her she had to go to college. She did that on her own."

Why hadn't Darcy ever told her about Maura? "And you're friends now?"

"Me and Darcy?" Maura looked surprised. "Oh no." She shook her head. "No, it still hurts too much what she did. Sometimes I can't stand to look at her. I don't think she likes to look at me either. I remind her of something she doesn't like to be reminded of. No, we're not friends."

Jasmine understood that. She didn't think she could ever be friends with Caitlin, even though what she did to Jasmine suddenly didn't seem quite so bad.

"I'll probably never forgive her, to tell you the truth," Maura said. "But I know I did the right thing in giving her a chance. Look what she's done with it." Maura laughed. "Who better to run a security company than someone who knows how to break in? And what she's doing with these street kids...I gave her a chance, and I'm proud of what she's doing with it, but I'm even more proud of myself for giving her the chance in the first place. She called me. It wasn't easy for her. She told me what that girl did to you and your ornaments."

Jasmine licked her lip where she'd been hit, though it was no longer sore.

"I know that must have hurt, and I can see why you'd want to call the police. But you can see now why Darcy can't do that, can't you?"

Jasmine nodded.

"All right. That's all I came to do." Maura rose. "Now dry your eyes, girl. It's Christmas Eve. It's supposed to be a happy time. I have a new husband now, and he has grandbabies coming over. I can't wait to see what Santa brought them." She moved to her car, opened the door, and got in. "You ought to close up shop and go home." Maura slammed the door and drove off.

"Merry Christmas," Jasmine called after her, but Maura was already gone.

She remained on the stool for a long while absorbing Maura's story. She wondered at first why Darcy hadn't told her about it, but her wonder soon changed to how Jasmine couldn't have seen it for herself. How could she not have realized Darcy had been a street kid too? Looking back, there had been clues. She knew Darcy had moved to Spokane when she was fifteen, that she didn't go to high school, that she didn't even get her GED until she was eighteen. What else could she have been doing during that time? She knew Darcy had no relationship with her family, and, of course, there was SleepSafe. Why would someone start a charitable organization for street kids, especially someone as young as Darcy, unless she had a particular reason to do it?

It was Darcy's success that had thrown her off. She didn't expect street kids, kids like Caitlin, to grow up to become a confident, successful businesswoman like Darcy. Darcy knew better, of course. Here she'd worried that Darcy was prejudiced in her defense of Caitlin, when it was really Jasmine who wore the blinders.

She pictured a young, angry Darcy breaking into businesses and smashing things. Of course she was angry. Due to her family's ignorance and cruelty, she would have had nothing of her

own. Was she thinking of her own mother when she smashed that sculpture? Jasmine felt a surge of anger on Darcy's behalf and felt for a moment like smashing something herself.

What Caitlin did to Jasmine didn't matter any more. It should never have mattered, not more than Darcy herself. Jasmine saw that now. How could she have turned her back on Darcy when Darcy was just being true to herself? She'd been so afraid Darcy would let her down that she made it happen. She forced an ultimatum on Darcy that she couldn't possibly accept, not without betraying herself.

It suddenly occurred to Jasmine that Darcy was the kind of person she wanted to be herself. She was the kind of person Jasmine wanted Rose to grow up to be, the kind of person their mother wasn't. Darcy was true, had been true all along. Jasmine just didn't recognize it.

Was it too late? Jasmine looked up. It had grown dark. It wasn't possible that Darcy could still be at her lot, but Jasmine didn't know where else to look. She rose from her stool, stepped forward, and stopped. A dark figure stood at the gate.

Jasmine moved forward slowly until she could see her face clearly. Darcy's eyes were wary, her face guarded, her hands shoved in the pockets of her coat, and her shoulders hunched. Jasmine stopped three feet away.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Jasmine asked.

"I was ashamed," Darcy said, and her voice shook.

"Of what you did when you were a kid?"

"I hate what I did. I never told anyone. I couldn't even tell you."

"I should have guessed."

Darcy frowned. "How could you have guessed?"

"I mean that you were a street kid. I should have figured that part out."

Darcy gave a twisted smile. "It's not something I like to talk about."

"I'm so sorry, Darcy." Jasmine took a step forward. "Will you forgive me?"

Darcy's eyes widened. "Me forgive you? For what?"

"For doubting you. I should have known you were true."

Darcy caught her breath. She lifted her hands from her pockets, but didn't seem to know what to do with them after that.

"You weren't choosing Caitlin over me," Jasmine said.

"Oh, God no." Darcy's voice was hoarse.

"You were choosing you over me. I mean, you were sticking with your beliefs, what you thought was right, even when it meant losing...me."

Darcy's shoulders slumped, her hands hung, and tears flooded her eyes. "I can't stand to lose you, Jasmine," she said, her voice choked, "but I can't turn Caitlin in."

"I know that now. Oh Darcy, don't cry." Jasmine took another step forward. She raised her hands to Darcy's face and used her thumbs to wipe her tears. "I admire you so much. I want to be like you. I want Rose to be like you. Oh, I just want you. I love you, Darcy Gabriel."

Jasmine rose to her toes and slipped her arms around Darcy's neck. She felt Darcy's arms wrap around her, felt Darcy's chest relax, and felt her shudder as she dropped her head to Jasmine's ear. "I was afraid you would hate me," she whispered.

"I don't hate you. I love you," Jasmine said again.

Darcy raised her head and smiled, though tears still leaked from her eyes. "I love you, Jasmine. I love you with all my heart. I love you so much."

Jasmine put her hands on the sides of Darcy's face, drew it down to hers, and kissed her. She put all the love she felt into her kiss, all her admiration for Darcy, all her remorse for hurting her,

and all her joy at being with her again, still loved. Darcy's arms tightened around her and she returned Jasmine's kiss with equal feeling. When the kiss finally ended, they smiled, sighed, and laughed. Jasmine felt a lightness that she had never felt before. It wasn't just love, she realized. It was love without fear.

Something wet touched her face. She wiped it away, surprised to find herself crying, and realized it wasn't tears at all. It was cold. She looked up. Fat white snowflakes dropped from the sky, hundreds of them, thousands of them, millions even, thick and sparkling, just like she'd been wishing for all season long. She looked at the trees that remained on the lot. Snow was already sticking to their branches making them look like they were in a Christmas pageant.

Jasmine turned her gaze back to Darcy in wonder. "How do you do that?"

Darcy was watching her with a smile. "Do what?"

"This!" Jasmine spread her arms and waved at the snow. "The weather is always perfect around you. Haven't you noticed? No, of course you haven't. You don't know the difference." Jasmine wrapped her arms around Darcy's neck again. "Well, I'm not going to put up with it any longer. From now on, I'm going to stick by your side so that I get all the good weather too."

Darcy laughed. "I don't know what you're talking about, my love, but if it will keep you by my side forever, I'm all for it." She lifted Jasmine off the ground, swung her in a circle, and cried, "Merry Christmas, my love!"

Chapter Twenty

THE SPOILS OF Darcy's Christmas stocking were spread out on the coffee table before her: an orange, a box of Cracker Jacks, a net bag filled with gold foil covered chocolate coins, a miniature slinky, a Wonder Woman washcloth compressed into the shape of star, a new toothbrush, a miniature tube of toothpaste, a sample size of dental floss, and a lottery ticket. The lottery ticket was a loser, but she still felt like the luckiest woman in the world with all her treasures spread out before her, treasures that included Jasmine and Rose.

They were still in their pajamas, and it was already the best Christmas Darcy'd had since she was fourteen years old. No, it was the best Christmas ever. Rose sat cross-legged on the floor, her attention divided between the contents of her stocking and the still wrapped packages beneath the tree. When Darcy had arrived the night before, she'd brought two presents with her, and she'd enjoyed watching Rose and Jasmine try not to stare as she placed them under the tree.

Darcy and Jasmine shared the loveseat, the only piece of furniture that fit into the tiny living room, since the tree—real, of course—took up half the space. Darcy sat sideways against the arm of the loveseat, one leg on the floor and the other spread out along the back of the cushions. Jasmine leaned against Darcy's chest, her head lying drowsily on her shoulder, with Darcy's arm wrapped around her. They hadn't slept much that night.

Darcy dropped a kiss on top of Jasmine's head. She still felt tender and raw and slightly dazed from her close brush with life without Jasmine. She felt like a prisoner on death row who'd just received a pardon from the Governor. She could hardly believe the richness of the life that lay in front of her. Everything was precious, right down to the dimples on the orange in her stocking. Rose was precious, looking about twelve years old with the lights of the tree reflecting on her shiny hair. The feel of Jasmine in her arms was the most precious of all. She felt like shouting, "Nobody move!" She wanted the moment to last forever.

Jasmine's cell phone rang. She leaned over, picked it up from the coffee table, and looked at the number. She sat up and Darcy loosened her grip.

"Collect call," Jasmine said. "I have to take this." She stood and headed for the bedroom.

"That's her dad," Rose said. "He always calls from the prison on Christmas."

"Really? I thought they didn't talk anymore."

"They don't, much," Rose said. "She doesn't go visit him anymore, but she's always nice to him when he calls. It's not like it happens very often." She unwrapped a gobstopper and popped it in her mouth.

They waited. Darcy could hear Jasmine's voice, but not what she was saying. A few minutes later, she returned.

"Sorry about that," Jasmine said, sitting next to Darcy. "He can't receive calls, he can only call out, I had to take it."

"No problem," Darcy said. "I didn't realize you still talked to him."

"He hasn't missed a Christmas," Jasmine said. "I think it's because all the other guys are calling their families. He feels left out."

“It’s not like he calls on her birthday or anything,” Rose said.

“Still, at least he cares enough to call at Christmas,” Darcy said. “When does he get out?”

“Later this year, if he manages to keep his good time,” Jasmine said.

“Will you see him?”

Jasmine shrugged. “Maybe. If he stays clean.”

“It’s worth a try,” Darcy said. “People change. Family is important.”

“Yeah? What about you?”

Darcy shook her head. “No.”

“Why not? Why is it worth a try with my dad, but not with your mom?”

“Your dad didn’t throw you out of the house when you were fifteen.”

“No, he took me on drug deals with him when I was ten.”

“That’s different.”

Jasmine turned her head and looked at Darcy, a challenge in her eyes. “I’m not sure it is. They both happened a long time ago. Maybe my dad has changed. Maybe your mom has changed.”

“She could get in touch with me if she wanted to.”

“Maybe she’s afraid to get in touch with you because she thinks you won’t forgive her.”

Darcy scowled. “Maybe I won’t forgive her.”

“Maybe you should give her a second chance.”

Darcy opened her mouth to respond, then closed it as she realized she had nothing to say.

“Tell you what,” Jasmine said, “I’ll give my dad a second chance if you give your mom a second chance.”

“More like his twenty-fifth chance,” Rose said.

“Well, you know what I mean,” Jasmine said.

Darcy hadn’t spoken to her mother in more than seventeen years. The thought of speaking to her now filled her with dread. But Jasmine was right. For all Darcy’s belief in second chances, she had never given her family one.

“I’ll be with you, if you like,” Jasmine said. “You could call her tonight when you get back from swimming.”

She felt a bubble of panic at the thought of calling her mother so soon, but Jasmine would be with her, and it was only a phone call after all. She could always hang up if it was too hard.

“Maybe,” Darcy finally said, and Jasmine looked satisfied.

Rose looked up. “Do you really have to leave at eleven?”

Darcy sighed. “Yeah. They need me to go with them or they can’t use the pool.”

“We won’t even be back from church by eleven,” Rose said.

“Sorry.”

Rose sucked on the giant jawbreaker that puffed out her cheek and looked pensively at Jasmine. “We might have to break with tradition, Jazz.”

“Which one?”

“The no presents ‘til after church one. I’m only thinking about Darcy,” she added quickly. “It’s not fair if she can’t be here for presents.”

Jasmine grinned at Darcy. “You feel like opening presents?”

“Of course I do,” Darcy said.

“Yeah!” Rose swept aside her stocking booty, got onto her knees, and passed out the gifts. There weren’t many. When she was finished there were four presents in front of Rose, including

one from her father, two presents for Jasmine, and one for Darcy. Rose's gift for Darcy already hung on the tree, the only candy ornament to survive among all of Jasmine's creations.

With little encouragement, Rose went first. Moments later she danced with excitement wearing her new letterman jacket and a pair of wireless over-ear headphones, her gift from Darcy. "Look at me," she said. "I'm just like a regular kid!"

Jasmine tensed and squeezed Darcy's hand, though she only laughed and said, "In Hello Kitty pajama pants?"

Darcy examined Jasmine's face and suddenly understood that Jasmine knew a lot more about Rose's years on the street than Rose realized. She hid her knowledge from Rose for the same reason Rose hid it from Jasmine. They were protecting each other.

"Hey, Hello Kitty is cool," Rose said. "Thank you so much, Darcy, I love these headphones. And I love the jacket, Jasmine. Thank you." She gave them both hugs, and settled back onto the floor, grinning hugely. "Your turn, Jasmine. Open mine."

Jasmine put the small package from Darcy aside and pulled the larger package onto her lap. "It's heavy," she said, tearing the paper wrapping. She uncovered a scratched and stained flat wooden box. Jasmine unlatched the clasp on one side, but Rose couldn't wait.

"It's an artist's box," she said, bouncing on her knees. "Like a briefcase made for artists. Look, it has a pallet and compartments for paint and everything."

"Wow, this is old," Jasmine said, fingering one of the compartments. "Look here, you can see spilled paint in the grooves of the wood. Rose, this is fantastic. Where'd you get it?"

"At a second-hand store, and you wouldn't believe how cheap it was."

"I love it. Thank you."

Jasmine set the box on the floor and picked up the small package from Darcy. She shot Darcy a wary look. The box was the size for jewelry. The wrong piece of jewelry too soon in a relationship could cause trouble, Darcy knew, but she was unable to resist when she saw it in the store. Jasmine opened the wrapping, saw the jewelry store logo, and shot Darcy another look. Darcy bit her lip as Jasmine opened the box.

"Oh!" Jasmine gasped and smiled. "It's so cute. Look, Rose, it's a snowman." She lifted a silver chain out of the box. The snowman pendant dangling at the bottom was only three quarters of an inch long. He was made of silver, and his eyes were tiny sapphires, his nose a ruby, and the buttons on his belly were diamond chips. Somehow the artist had designed his mouth to create an impish grin, not much different than that of the candy snowman grinning at them from the tree. "Oh, Darcy, thank you so much. I love it. Put it on me." She handed the necklace to Darcy, turned her back to her, and lifted her hair.

Darcy draped the necklace around Jasmine's neck, closed the clasp, and dropped a kiss on Jasmine's tempting neck. Jasmine spun around. Her eyes sparkled and her smile was so genuine that Darcy knew she really liked the gift. She sighed in relief.

"Your turn, Darcy," Rose said.

Darcy turned to her gift. It was large and flat, perhaps eighteen inches by two feet. The size of a painting. She felt as leery as Jasmine had looked when opening her gift. Darcy had still never seen any of Jasmine's paintings. What if she didn't like it? Or what if it was just some old painting Jasmine had sitting around that she'd wrapped up when she and Darcy got back together, when it was too late on Christmas Eve to go shopping?

She picked at the tape on the top.

Rose frowned. "Are you one of those people who try to save the paper?" Disapproval dripped from her voice.

Darcy laughed. “No, I’m not.” She grabbed a corner of paper and gave it a rip. “Oh.” She was right, it was a painting, but it wasn’t some old thing that Jasmine had lying around. She lifted it up to look closer.

It was a painting of Darcy. There was no mistaking her, though there were few details in the image. Simple strokes suggested the shape of her face, the lay of her hair, her stance as she stood in the dark behind a chain link fence and gazed at the artist. It was the eyes that drew her attention, green and gray and glowing. They stared directly out of the canvas, and somehow Jasmine had managed to convey the emotion behind them. Even Darcy, looking at herself, could tell she was in love.

“That’s how you look at me,” Jasmine said softly, her chin resting on Darcy’s arm as she stared at the painting too.

Darcy turned and met Jasmine’s eyes. She’d watched Darcy open the gift with no anxiety in her face. She knew she was good.

“This is amazing,” Darcy said. “I didn’t realize... When did you do this?”

“After Caitlin crushed the ornaments.” Jasmine shrugged. “I had a little time on my hands.”

“I told you she was painting,” Rose said, grinning. “I just didn’t say what.”

Darcy swallowed as emotion welled up inside her. During those long three days apart, even though Jasmine had walked away from their relationship hurt and angry, she’d been painting this loving vision of Darcy.

Looking again at the painting, Darcy saw two pale arcs, slightly less dark than the night, swoop over the figure’s shoulders, barely noticeable. She traced one lightly with a finger. “What are these?”

“Your wings,” Jasmine said.

Darcy blinked. “My wings?”

“Mm hmm.” Jasmine’s expression was serious with just a hint of a smile. “You might not have realized they were there, but I saw them. You’re an angel, Darcy Gabriel.”

Darcy set the painting down on the coffee table. She stood, drew Jasmine up with her, and buried her face in Jasmine’s neck, blinking away tears. “Thank you, my love. I love it. I love you. I will love you forever.” She raised her head. “And you too,” she said to Rose. “This is the best Christmas ever.”

They stood in each other’s arms for a long moment until a rumbling from Darcy’s stomach interrupted them.

Jasmine laughed and took a step back. “I think it’s time for cinnamon French toast.”

“And bacon,” Rose said.

“You bought bacon?”

“Of course,” Rose said. “It’s Christmas. We always have bacon on Christmas.”

The End

About the Author

Kate McLachlan is the Goldie award winning author of several novels, including the Rip Van Dyke time-travel series. Kate lives in Eastern Washington with her wife, Tonie Chacon, who is also a Regal Crest author, and their two dogs and two cats.

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by Pauline George

Jess is a modern day lesbian Lothario who was so hurt from an emotionally damaging relationship that now she doesn't let anyone get close. She protects herself by keeping her relationships short and sweet. When Jess's sister Josie challenges her to get to know a woman before she jumps into bed with her, Jess is intrigued. How hard can that be?

Although she's a serial monogamist, Jess has deep-seated morals that will be tested to the limit by her carefree acceptance of Josie's challenge. When she falls for her sister's best friend Katie, she suddenly finds her life upended, and she's left wondering if she actually has what it takes to have a lasting and fulfilling relationship. Is she destined to spend her life bed-hopping? Will her ever-growing attraction to Katie be the catalyst for romance, or will Katie's indecision about her life prove to be Jess's downfall?

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The Game of Denial

by Brenda Adcock

Joan Carmichael, a successful New York businesswoman, lost the love of her life ten years earlier. Alone, she raised their four children, always cherishing her deep love for her wife. Her memories of their life together come back even stronger as one of their daughters prepares to marry. Joan and her four adult kids fly to Virginia to meet the groom's family and attend the ceremony at the small horse farm owned by the mother of the fiancé.

Evelyn "Evey" Chase, also a widow, has secrets in her past, and her memories of her dead husband aren't pleasant. She's concerned about meeting her future daughter-in-law's family, certain that she and her three kids will have little in common with the wealthy New Yorkers. Besides, the thought of two women in a relationship bringing up a family together makes her uncomfortable, even though her daughter-in-law assures her that lesbianism is not hereditary or catching.

When the two women meet they are drawn to one another in a way neither anticipated, and the game of denial begins. Evey fights her attraction and doesn't realize the effect she has on Joan. Joan tries to shake off her feelings, seeing them as a betrayal to the memory of her wife. Besides, isn't Evey Chase straight? After Evey and Joan share an intimate moment at the wedding reception, they are both emotionally terrified and Joan flees. Will Joan overcome the feeling of betraying her former mate and stop denying her desire to be happy again? Can Evey finally face her past in order to accept the love of another woman and the desire to live the life she had once dreamed of?

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Moving Target

by Melissa Good

Dar and Kerry both feel the cruise ship project seems off somehow, but they can't quite grasp what is wrong with the whole scenario. Things continue to go wrong and their competitors still look to be the culprits behind the problems. Then new information leads them to discover a plot that everyone finds difficult to believe. Out of her comfort zone yet again, Dar refuses to lose and launches a new plan that will be a win-win, only to find another major twist thrown in her path. With everyone believing Dar can somehow win the day, can Dar and Kerry pull off another miracle finish? Do they want to?

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Second Chances

by Lynne Norris

Alex Margulies is a self-driven chief attending physician in the emergency department of a large community medical center. She is fierce and merciless with her staff, expecting the same tireless dedication from her peers as she does from herself.

Driven by her recent failures, Alex struggles to put her troubled past behind her. With the annual influx of new residents to the hospital, she meets one of her new charges, Regina Kingston, a bright, young, promising doctor. Before long, Regina finds herself irresistibly drawn to the enigmatic physician despite the woman's fiery personality and maligned reputation.

As professional differences come to light and personalities clash, Alex and Regina both struggle to overcome their own demons. It is within each other that they will find the strength to overcome their darkest moments, surviving to live and love again.

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