

~ A Family Gathering ~

(Family Reunion Part Three)

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Disclaimers, the story and characters are the sole possession of the author and may not be reproduced posted or sold without the author's permission. So there! If for any reason real or imagined you are uncomfortable with or do not wish to read a story containing graphic descriptions of two consenting adult women in a loving and sexual relationship then do not read this story or anything else I have ever written. If for any reason it is illegal for you to view this material go away and do not return until it is no longer a crime. Hey this is a sequel if you haven't read parts one and two I suggest that you do or you won't know what the heck is going on.

A special thank goes out to my beta reader Mountain Girl.

As always this is for Heather.

"Oh the weather outside is frightful," I sing along to the radio enjoying the season despite the wacko drivers and hygienically challenged people that crowd into the stores. I don't know which are worse; the folks that have never encountered a bar of soap or the ones that feel a need to douse their bodies in over powering perfume. Doesn't matter it is all part of the battle to finish my holiday shopping before the holiday. I made a promise to myself, and to the love of my life, that I would finish my shopping one-week before Christmas Eve. Normally I wouldn't even consider such an arduous task. But I've discovered that it is much easier when you have a second adult who is more than willing to drive your spunky, albeit inquisitive, eight year old to and from school.

Normally I live to escort my precious child to and from school, but during the holidays it is a pain since Andie is very bright. Now, how does one hide a boatload of gifts from a wonder kin, especially when the gifts in question are sitting in the back seat of the car when you pick her up? The answer to my prayers came in the form of the first and last love in my life. God bless Maddie and her patience, not to mention having the good manners to work at the same grade school Andie attends.

Oh, and having your girlfriend living in the backyard is a bonus. Well, in the house located behind mine where I can hide my little angel's gifts. Andie has already begun to question the existence of good, old St. Nick, and frankly I'm not ready to cross that bridge, even if she is. Honestly I still believe in Santa Claus, so why shouldn't my kid?

To be perfectly honest, when she stops believing it will be one of the milestones that will painfully inform me that Andie won't be a little girl forever. Next she'll be moving out, going to

college, and I'm not ready for that. I should have seen it coming. Andie is much brighter than most of her classmates and it was only a matter of time before she connected the dots. Forgive me, but I just want this Christmas to be perfect.

So far it is the best Christmas on record. My daughter is happy and healthy, and Maddie is living a stones throw away. In the beginning I had hoped that she wouldn't stay in the guesthouse, but, to be honest, it is nice being close and still being able to say '*Honey I need a little space,*' whenever you need it. Granted, Maddie does sleep in my bed most nights, and she is the one who needs space more than I do, still we have a good relationship.

I can't wait to spend Christmas Eve with my family, and having my lover a part of the holiday celebration just makes it so much more special. The only thing troubling me is that Maddie's father is flying in to join us, and I know he doesn't like me. I can't say that I blame him. After all I did defile his daughter when she was a teenager. If someone ever did to Andie what I did to Maddie I'd set him or her on fire.

I'm just hoping that Eddie Spencer will forgive me, and not try to bludgeon me to death simply because I was an uncaring ass when I was a teenager. I guess I will find out when we tell him that Maddie is sleeping at the main house during the holidays. Yikes! This guy is going to hate me. I have a sneaking suspicion that my own father, who is very bright and understanding, still pretends that I've never had sex. An assumption that is easier for him to cling to since I have given him a grandchild through the miracle of science, and not passion.

When I pull into my driveway I set aside my fears. I am more concerned by the old woman lurking around my front stoop and the pile of luggage she has with her. "Can I help you?" I begin, slipping my sunglasses down the bridge of my nose in order to get a better look at the mysterious stranger.

"Oh crap," I hiss under my breath as she turns to me. Despite the years I recognize the harpy in an instant. "Shelia," I mutter while approaching the one person on the face of the planet I had hoped never to see again.

"I'm looking for my daughter," she barks in the most undignified manner, obviously failing to recognize me, which could work in my favor. "I was given this address," she adds harshly while waving a piece of paper in my face.

"She rents the guest house in the back," I politely respond, fighting against the ire that is steadily building up inside of me. "I'm afraid Madeline won't be home for at least an hour. She's working." I stress that last part knowing that gaining employment and actually earning a living is a concept that has eluded Shelia for her entire life. I know that my bitter attitude stems from the way she tried to hustle my father down the aisle, and from the way she sponges off Maddie whenever she is in between husbands.

"What am I supposed to do until then?" She demands, glaring down at me as if I hold the answer to her plight.

My first instinct is to send her packing. After all, the last time I saw this woman she did slap me in the face, not to mention almost put Maddie in the hospital. Still, for better or worse, she is Maddie's mother. "Why don't you come inside?" I suggest against my better judgment. "Mrs." my voice trails off when I realize that I have no idea what this woman's last name is.

"Byron," she huffs as if I'm troubling her by allowing her inside my home. "For now," she adds in a whisper that I'm certain I wasn't meant to hear. I bite back my anger and help her with her bags. I'm horrified by the way she enters my home, as if she already lives there and I am the guest. That and when I say I will help her with her bags it means I carry all of them inside while she looks around my home.

"I'm sorry what did you just say?" I sputter, before I pull my car over to the side of the road. I'm a big fan of hang up and drive more so after I received Shea's call.

"I said your mother is here," Shea repeated in an irate tone. "In fact her fat ass is parked on my sofa, and she is demanding food along with the fire I just lit."

"You're kidding?" I stammer wondering how my mother got my new address.

"Do I sound like I'm kidding?" Shea hisses in response.

"How did she find me?" I whimper helplessly.

"I have no idea," Shea ruefully sighs in response. "The good news is she doesn't recognize me, and hasn't even troubled herself to ask my name. Other than that I am fighting the urge to throttle the woman, so please tell me that you will be home soon."

"Why?" I question knowing that I am about to suggest something very wrong. Andie glances up from her game boy, and I know she wants to know what is going on.

"Why what?" Shea sputters.

"Why are you fighting that urge? I say go for it," I hear myself suggesting.

"It would be rude," Shea tries to reason with me. "Honey hurry home. I have to hang up now; I think the Queen of the damn is going through my stuff."

"I love you," I meekly offer. My face brightens when she repeats the sentiment. Her voice is warm and comforting. Andie blinks her eyes, and I understand that she wants to know what is going on. "Come on Sweetie, we need to get home."

"Who is visiting?" Andie questions me in a very determined tone.

"My mother," I grimly supply while guiding my car back onto the road.

"Neat!" Andie beams with excitement.

"Not really," I grumble. "Andie, my mother and I aren't like your mother and grandmother. We don't get along."

"Why?" The little angel pries and I am tempted to tell her it is because my mother is evil.

"It's an adult thing," I sigh heavily hoping that this will end the inquisition. She opens her cute little mouth fully prepared to drag the answers out of me when I cut her off. "Andie it is private. Okay?"

"Okay." She glumly concedes returning her attention back to her game.

"I just spoke to Maddie," I announce, scaring my guest who is snooping under my Christmas tree. "She will be home soon."

"Do you and your husband rent as well?" She questions me as if I am a suspect.

"No," I begin slowly reminding myself it would be wrong to hit an old woman. "I own the houses."

"Good settlement," she smiles back at me.

"No, good investment," I huff. "Look, Uhm, aren't you a little curious as to what my name is?"

"My apologies," she smiles sweetly. Suddenly I'm her best friend. "Mrs.?"

"Miss," I correct her with a scowl. "Shea Griffin," I stress waiting for the light to dawn. My name flies over her head.

"A pleasure," she oozes still unaware that we have met before. Instead her eyes are looking around my home, taking stock. "Such a big house for just one person."

"Two, I have a daughter," I grumble spying a taxi pulling into the driveway. "Now what? Excuse me, it seems that my home is very popular today," I make my apologies noticing the tall man unloading his belongings from the taxi in the middle of my driveway. "Hello?" I cautiously offer tentatively approaching the tall man with the ponytail. I gasp instantly recognizing him from the pictures Maddie has shown me. "Mr. Spencer, you're early," I choke out.

"You must be Shea," he carefully greets me watching my every move. "I thought I'd surprise my pumpkin."

"Pumpkin," I laugh instantly liking this man. My good humor quickly fades when I grasp the situation. "Wait this is bad."

"I beg your pardon," he scowls alerting me that I am quickly losing ground.

"Let me explain," I quickly interject. "Normally right about now I'd explain that Maddie is on her way home and should be here soon. In the meantime I'd escort you into my home, make you comfortable, and try everything to convince you that I am not a juvenile delinquent."

"That would be a wise course of action," he notes furrowing his brow. I hastily grab his luggage. "I got that," he sternly adds grabbing most of the bags from my grasp.

"As I was saying," I slowly began while guiding him around back to Maddie's home. "That would be my plan, but at this very moment your ex-wife is parked in my living room."

"I've never been married," he sputters in confusion while I unlock the guesthouse.

"What?" I question shaking my head to clear my thoughts. "Okay, let me rephrase things for you," I offer while we load his suitcases into the guesthouse. "Shelia, Maddie's mother, showed up and is probably going through my check book at this very moment."

"Son of a," he gasps. "Sorry. Why is she here? Never mind, do you have any holy water handy?"

"Fresh out," I smile back at him. "I was tempted to leave her in a snow bank, but she is Maddie's mother."

"Hard to believe since her kind usually eats their young," he groans. "How did she find her?"

"Again I have no idea," I try to plead my case. "Look I understand you don't want to talk to her, so I just need a few moments to unload my car and hide my daughter's gifts in here. Then I'll go back and try to keep Shelia entertained before she cracks the code on my computer. Maddie should be back soon. Then we can straighten out this mess. In the meantime make yourself comfortable. There is fresh wood in the fireplace and, if you're exhausted, the bathroom has a Jacuzzi. I think there is food in the fridge. I know Maddie bought some of your favorites."

"Are you sure you don't want me to go with you?" He timidly inquires. The beads of sweat forming on his brow alert me that this man would rather walk through fire than share space with Shelia.

"No, I've got it covered," I quickly reassure him. "Frankly I'd love having back up, but my daughter is about to come home and I'm afraid of what she will see and hear if the two of you are in the same room."

"Good call," Eddie nods frantically.

"Just make yourself comfortable. I think I have a solution," I blow out tersely before bolting out to my car. I make quick work of unloading the packages trying to be polite to Eddie each time I barge in. While I complete this task my cell phone is plastered to my ear from my efforts to try to rectify the bizarre situation.

"There is my angel," Shea greets Andie as we enter the house and I help her with her coat and boots. Not that Andie needs my help I'm just postponing the inevitable. "Andie would you mind going to your room?"

Andie scowls for moment, but the stern look on her mother's face cuts off any argument she was preparing. "Where is she?" I meekly inquire while Andie heads up the staircase pounding her feet with each step in an effort to convey her displeasure.

"In the living room working on her fifth cup of tea," Shea wearily explains. "Oh, and your father is hiding in the guesthouse."

"What?" I gasp horrified by the turn of events. "They didn't see one another did they?"

"Do you see any blood spatters?" Shea quips with a smile. "No, she doesn't know he is here. Now, I hope you don't mind, but I've made arrangements that might defuse things."

"We're burying Mom in the backyard?" I gleefully inquire.

"No, but that actually sounds better than what I came up with," Shea laughs. "I booked her a room at the Ramada."

"Wait," I scowl fearful of what could happen. "Not on your Amex I hope."

"Yes," Shea slowly responds. I on the hand wince. "She might need to order food. I mean we could put her in the guestroom, but I thought that would be a bad idea since your father is in the backyard."

"Shea, it is a wonderful idea and very generous," I try to explain. "But your Amex doesn't have a limit. Trust me dinner won't be all she will be ordering once she finds out. I can't let you do this."

"Honey," Shea flatly begins. "It is done. I can switch it to my visa that should slow her down. In the meantime we have to deal with her. She's already pawed over all the pictures in the living room, and I'm quite certain she knows that we're lovers by now. I thought she was rude before she did the math, now she's out and out nasty. Now it is a hotel or we start looking for a shovel."

"Fine," I whimper. "I'll go talk to Shelia."

"Shelia?" She blinks with surprise.

"When I was in my twenties she insisted that I not call her mom anymore," I glumly explain while trying to bolster my courage. "She would introduce me to her boyfriends as her sister."

"Oh so she only dates blind men now?" Shea gaped with surprise. "Honestly they didn't believe her did they?"

"Don't know, don't care," I mutter bitterly.

"Madeline!" I hear my mother's shrill tone beckoning me.

My body tenses from the sound of her voice. "I'll go," I whisper to my lover who seems determined to stand beside me throughout the entire ordeal. "You've endured enough for one day. Why don't you hang out with Andie and I'll deal with Shelia."

"Maddie," Shea begins ready to argue.

"Trust me things will go much more smoothly if it is just her and me" I reason. "Go upstairs and play with your daughter," I can see that my lover is preparing to argue with my logic. "Please?"

"Fine," Shea grunts with exasperation while I brace myself before leaving the comfort of the entryway.

"Shelia?" I greet the woman who gave birth to me and has had very little interest in my life since that moment. There are times when your life seems completely surreal; this is one of those moments. My mother has her plump backside planted in Shea's favorite chair sipping tea like she is the Queen Mum, my father is hiding in my apartment just across the yard, and my lover and her daughter have been banished to the upstairs. "Well this is strange," I mutter under my breath. "Put your feet down," I scold my mother who has her feet propped up.

"I beg your pardon? Is that anyway to greet your Mother?" She scolds me her eyes narrowing and warning me that I am in for it. I flinch before I realize that I'm an adult and I have the home field advantage.

"Oh, we're not sisters anymore?" I quip noticing that her eyes are dimming. "Don't," I sternly caution her. "We're going to play a game that my students love. We are going to play let's pretend."

"What in heavens name are you babbling about girl?" She demands sighing dramatically before taking a sip of her tea.

"I'm going to pretend that my mother, that would be you, dropped in to see me for the holidays," I prattle on amazed that I haven't caved. "And that you didn't barge into my lover's home acting like the queen of the universe."

"Madeline," she begins with a cruel smile that is over shadowed by her harsh tone.

"Not a word old woman," I warn her with a wave of my hand. "You have a room at the Ramada. I'll drive you over and during our trip we'll pretend to enjoy one another's company. Not one word about my lifestyle or questions regarding Shea's finances. At some point I would appreciate it if you thanked her for her generosity."

"The Ramada?" She sighs with disappointment.

"Best you're going to do," I snap.

"What about your cozy, little house around back?" She challenges me with a coy look.

"You could stay there, but I doubt that Dad would be willing to bunk with you," she confidently countered.

"What in heavens name brought him crawling out of the woodwork?" She grumbles finally climbing out of her comfortable perch.

"He wanted to see me," I bitterly respond.

"You shouldn't be listening," Andie cautioned me.

I glance down at her and almost laugh since she also has her ear pressed against the doorway. "Neither should you," I concede pulling her away from the door. "Move before we get caught."

"I don't like her," Andie huffs plopping down on her bed.

"Well," I begin trying to think of something nice to say about Shelia that would encourage Andie to at least make an attempt at being polite. "Just remember she is Maddie's mother." I almost laugh when Andie scowls up at me. "Just be polite," I toss out in a haggard tone, just as the door swings open.

"Is it safe?" I tease in an effort to erase the worried look from my lover's face.

"I'm driving her to the hotel," she wearily supplies. "I won't be long. Could you explain things to my Dad?"

"Not a problem," I willingly offer. "When you get back the four of us will have a nice dinner together."

"Maddie is sad," Andie glumly informs me after my lover departs and we head downstairs.

"I know Sweetie," I sigh ruefully. "Why don't you draw a picture for her while I go get her Dad? You'll like him. He's very nice."

"I drew a picture for her at school today," Andie explains. "I guess I could draw another one."

"Excellent," I smile. "Just stay at the kitchen table. I will be right back."

"The coast is clear," I brightly inform Eddie when he answers the door. "Maddie is driving Shelia to a hotel. Why don't you come and wait at my place?"

He nods and grabs his coat. "Just one thing," I begin knowing that this man still doesn't trust me. "My daughter has already taken an immediate dislike towards Shelia," I carefully begin.

"Bright girl," he laughs as we approach the house. "Are you sure she is yours?"

"Why do people keep asking that?" I laugh. "Yes, she is mine. The thing is she is very young, and I don't want her to start thinking it is all right to talk about people behind their back. No one likes Shelia, except for Maddie, and that is only because she is her mother. When my father was dating Shelia my mother never said a bad word against her. My brothers and I were encouraged to give her a chance. Granted, I still didn't like her, but I tried. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"Yes," he nods thoughtfully. "Andie shouldn't have to hear us gossiping. From what I've heard she is a very bright little girl. I'll be on my best behavior. Just for the record you're not out of the woods yet."

"I don't expect to be," I snicker. "Mr. Spencer, as a parent I understand that I will never be good enough for your daughter just as I doubt that any one will ever be good enough for my daughter. The only thing I can offer is that I love your daughter with all my heart and soul. I'd never do anything to hurt or disrespect her."

I feel a small glimmer of hope from the smile he flashes. He and Andie hit it off instantly. They play and I now know something that I have suspected since I first met Maddie; her father is a great guy. I suggest making dinner for all of us, but Eddie wants to take everyone, including my parents, out to dinner. I'm torn between going out and not cooking. plus scoring bonus points with Eddie sounds fabulous. I am, however, worried that Maddie might not be up for such a large event.

I score even higher points when I explain that I need to check with Maddie first. Hey, I knew I wasn't lying when I told him that Maddie comes first, but showing him has taken a slight edge off of his view of me. Maddie sounds tired when I call her, but she agrees. Her lack of enthusiasm has me concerned, but she reassures me that it will be fun. So my next call is to my parents.

An hour later we are all crowded into my kitchen chatting away, and playing with Andie while Eddie and my Dad talk about motorcycles. My mother groans at the discussion. I am slightly surprised. I had known that they had kept in touch, but I had no idea that they were friends. The conversation turns towards the upcoming holidays and, despite the merriment, everyone, including Andie, keeps sneaking a look at the clock on the wall. The unspoken question looming over all of us was where was Maddie?

I am on edge; the time slowly ticks away. I had witnessed Shelia's true colors before, but today even I was shocked by her rudeness. Amazing how a woman can change when there isn't a man within a hundred yards. Her behavior reminded me of a girl I knew in high school, Laurel Myers. Laurel was a lot of fun and a good friend until she had a boyfriend. Then we never saw or heard from her until she had finally driven her new beau off by smothering him with attention.

There is a collective sigh of relief when Maddie finally returns. The dim look in her normally brilliant gaze worries me. She hugs her father before greeting my family. "Dad," I begin. "Why don't you make our reservation while I help Maddie freshen up?"

My father nods in agreement. I take my weary lover by the hand and guide her up to our bedroom. No words are spoken. I simply close the door and wrap my arms around her body while I stand behind her. I cocoon her feeling the stress seeping from her when she leans into my embrace.

"Thank you," she finally offers after expelling a very heavy sigh.

"We can still cancel," I whisper. "They won't even miss us as long as we send the kid."

"No," she laughs. "Believe it or not after this afternoon having dinner with normal people is a Godsend."

"It must have been rough if my family qualifies as normal," I jest.

Dinner is terrific with lots of chatter about the holiday and day-to-day events. It is truly what I needed after being locked in a car with my mother. Shea has no understanding of how truly normal her family is. My dear, sainted mother wasted no time informing me that even though she thought my life was disgusting, and how dangerous it was to have some one like me teaching small children, I should at least capitalize on the situation now that I have finally met someone of means.

I still can't believe how she could degrade my love life in one breath and in the next suggest that now that the laws have changed I should be hauling Shea's butt down to city hall. "Living in the guesthouse won't pay off," she chastised me even after I painfully explained that I didn't want to rush things. "If she is charging you rent she isn't going to put a ring on your finger."

"She is charging half the rent she should and only because I insist on paying rent," I barked in response. I tried, once again, to explain that I enjoy earning my own way in the world, and I love Shea and she loves me. My words fell on deaf ears. My mother is thoroughly convinced that Shea will send me packing the first time a prettier face strolls by, and I am nothing more than tenant and baby sitter. By the time we arrived at the Ramada I secretly wished that Shea had taken me seriously and helped me bury Mom in the backyard.

After dinner I return with my father to my little house. Call me selfish, but I want sometime alone with him before the insanity of the holiday strikes in full force. Don't misunderstand I'm still sleeping in Shea's bed tonight, but for now I just need to see my Dad. Thankfully Shea is more than understanding.

"Dinner was nice," Dad throws out while we relax by the fire.

"Yes it was," I quietly agree still caught in a funk from the day's events.

"Shea wasn't at all what I was expecting," he concedes with a slight smile.

"I told you she was all grown up," I almost laugh in response. "When she was a teenager I thought she was the hottest thing since sliced bread. Now I am amazed every day at the woman she is. Trust me, if she was still the same punk she was back then I wouldn't have given her a second look this time around."

"I know," he sighs. "She really scored big time with the way she handled Shelia. Speaking of which, how did it go with your mother?" I respond with a grunt and roll my eyes. "I suspected as much. Can't be easy for her these days."

"Excuse me?" I sputter confused that he might actually try to defend her.

"The way she has lived her life," he begins in a thoughtful tone. "She wasn't prepared for what happened later in life. Haven't you noticed that her husbands and boyfriends are much older than they used to be?"

"I might have if she included me in her life or took an interest in mine," I sadly explain. "She's my mother, it might be nice if she dropped me a line or tried to take an interest in my life. In the past decade I've only seen her when she needs something. Just once I want her to ask me how I am doing or tell me she's proud of me. I have a good job that I love, I'm in a relationship with an amazing woman, and we are deeply in love. Her only comment was if I must live a perverse lifestyle I should at least cash in on it."

"She does love you," Dad tries to cajole me. "She just doesn't know how to show you."

"Dad, I know about the child support, and how she only agreed to let me live with you if you kept paying her," I spit out fighting against the pain of wounds I thought had healed a long time ago. "Dad, every time she pops into my life I keep praying that she cares. Each time she ends up disappointing me. I'm not going to let it happen this time. All I want is to spend the holiday with my family. Sadly my mother isn't a part of that."

He sits quietly. What can he say? It is the truth. He is my family. Shea, Andie and the rest of the Griffins are my family. "I did agree to have dinner with her tomorrow," I explain silently hoping that just perhaps this once Mom and I can experience a nice evening.

I find life extraordinarily odd at times like the way Maddie and I first met. If that wasn't a strange way to meet the love of your life I don't know what is. Here I am again enduring a phenomenally odd encounter. I got a call early this morning from the last person I had expected to ever ring me. Maddie was already at work so I didn't have back up when she called and invited me to meet her.

I was so stunned that I had no defense, and couldn't think of a single reason to refuse her invitation. Now here I sit in a small restaurant across from my lover's mother. The one person on the face of the planet I distrust and genuinely dislike.

When I arrived for my luncheon date Shelia greeted me with the usual false smile and empty platitudes. Now I have no idea how to deal with her. Just after we place our order the veneer slips and now I find myself sitting across from a complete stranger. She isn't pumping me for information, and she isn't being a complete bitch. Instead she is just sitting there seemingly lost in her own world not speaking.

"I have to admit I didn't recognize you when we first met," she finally states in a soft voice. Her eyes are distant. "You've certainly grown up a lot since the last time we met."

"I'll give you that," I concede since we all know it is the truth. "I was hell on wheels during my teen years."

"I kept waiting for Madeline to join forces with you," she almost laughs. "She never hit her angst. I was preparing for it since the day she was born. But Madeline was always such a quiet child even as a teenager. Except for that one night I caught the two of you together she never caused me a moment's trouble. Now before you say anything I know I handled that badly. Shea, I just walked in on my child, my baby, having sex. Put yourself in my shoes."

"It would shock and upset me," I agree. "Not to the point where I would beat my child. I've never raised a hand to Andie and I never will."

"Good," Shelia sighs heavily. "It is a path I regret, but I didn't know any better. You think you were trouble as a teenager, trust me you have no idea. You didn't come home pregnant by the biggest punk in town who refused to marry you. I thought Eddie was a God, and the way I ran around drove my parents insane. The more they told me I couldn't see him the more time I spent with him. I thought I was in love, and I thought that Eddie and I would get married and live happily ever after."

"A common teenaged assumption," I respond wondering just where the conversation is heading. In the back of my mind I am filled with fears of how much Andie will change in the next few years.

"Worried about your own daughter?" She laughs.

"Doesn't every parent worry?" I snap in response.

"Yes," she snickers. "Mine were right. I just never expected them to throw me out of the house. I also never suspected that Eddie would dump me."

"Strange, I fully expected my parents to kick me to the curb when they found out the truth about me, and I never expected to end up with my first love," I assess almost embarrassed by how well my life turned out. "That doesn't excuse the way you've treated Maddie."

"No it doesn't, and I don't know how to change things between us," she offers sullenly. "I was a teenager, scared and confused. I was alone. Eddie is a wonderful father, now. Not when I was pregnant. Being on my own, having to drop out of school and work night and day while I was pregnant changed me. By the time he decided to be a father I was angry with him. I vowed that I didn't need him and that I would find a way to make a good life for Madeline. I became so focused on finding a good father and husband that I forgot about why I was doing it. Do you remember your first Christmas as a mother?"

"Oh course," I beam the memory of spoiling my baby girl flooding my mind. "I went overboard not that Andie knew what was happening. It was the best Christmas for me anyways."

"Madeline's first Christmas was the two of us in a one room apartment with no heat," Shelia sadly explains. "I felt as if I had failed. Eddie showed up with a truckload of presents and threatening to take her away because he wouldn't have his child living in a hellhole. It made me angrier than I have ever been. Where did he get off? He abandoned us and now he wanted to take my child. I couldn't let that happen. So I found a nice a man and married him before he knew what was happening."

"I'm not unsympathetic to what happened to you," I slowly begin. "But at what point did you start blaming Maddie for your mistakes?"

"I never did," she barks at me frightening the poor waiter who had the bad manners to deliver our meals at that very moment.

"As much as I want to believe you," I continue ignoring the tears forming in her eyes. "I was there. I saw how you treated her, and how you gave her up just because she didn't fit into your life."

"You don't understand," she protests.

"No, I don't," I agree. "I would like nothing better than to see you and Maddie make amends for her sake not yours. You don't even know her. Since your arrival yesterday you've managed to chastise her about her job, her love life and everything else. Maddie is an amazing woman, and if you hurt her again I will hunt you down and make you sorry that you ever took the time to find her."

"I beg your pardon," she snarls.

"I'm serious," I assert. "If you want to know your daughter I suggest that at dinner tonight you listen to her and don't lecture her. I'm not hungry," I add waving for the waiter and paying the check. "I know my words are harsh, but you weren't the one who was holding your daughter last night while she tossed and turned from nightmares. Enjoy your lunch."

I storm out of the restaurant I pray that I haven't just made a horrible mistake. Shelia's words seemed sincere enough, but I still can't forget what happened in the past, and how much it hurts my lover.

I enter the restaurant I am filled with trepidation. Not an uncommon feeling when I am off to meet my mother. Shea was edgy when I arrived home. There was something troubling her, and I regret that I had to rush off instead of finding out what was going on. With any luck Mother will tick me off in record time and I can be home by eight so I can be with my family.

"I was wondering if you were going to show up," my mother smiles up at me when I take my seat at the table.

"Why wouldn't I?" I shake my head in confusion.

"After my luncheon with Shea I was certain that you wouldn't show," she explains causing my eyes bulge and my jaw drops.

"What?" I sputter gasping for air. "When?"

"Today," she responds with a smile. "She not only told me where to get off, but how to get there."

I sit there gaping at her mildly upset that Shea had failed to mention any of this to me. "Madeline calm down," my mother offers in gentle tone that I have rarely heard her use. "She was right. I tried to explain why I am the way I am, and although she was sympathetic, all she cared about was you. I don't claim to understand your life and I don't know if I ever will, but I am pleased that you've found someone who loves you enough to tell me to go to hell."

"Well that confirms it you're insane," I sputter in response feeling completely unbalanced by my Mother's sudden cavalier attitude.

"Don't be ridiculous Madeline at my age it is called being eccentric," she quips.

"And now you're making jokes," I gape at her. "Okay who are you, and what have you done with my mother?"

"I deserve that," she responds with a smile that fails to reach her eyes. "When I discovered that I was pregnant and quite on my own I became determined to make a good life for us. I was hell bent on proving to my parents that I could be successful. Problem was I only knew one way to do that; I had to marry someone of means. Somewhere along the way I forgot why I was trying so hard. I forgot I was doing this for my child. I do love you Madeline, and I am sorry that I neglected to show you just how much."

"Thank you," I gulp out my stunned response. "Why now?"

"Because I sat in a restaurant this afternoon explaining all the reasons why I had failed when it came to raising you," she slowly explains. "And none of it mattered to Shea. The only thing that

mattered was you. It was then I realized that every time you look at me I see the same look of betrayal in your eyes that I possessed when your grandparents kicked me out of the house."

"So this is a recent epiphany?" I question her still not fully believing that she has finally seen the light.

"Very," she snickers before releasing a heavy sigh. "I'm not saying that I can change, but I would like to know my only child. Perhaps a phone call every now and then?"

I am unable to respond still stunned by the drastic change in my mother's personality. Had this been the person she had always hidden by a need to achieve some one else's ideal of what you should be? I guess I will never truly know for now I am filled with a sense of relief that my estranged mother finally has taken an interest in my life.

I am relaxing by the fire trying to read the evening paper. I can't focus. I am still upset by the luncheon I shared with Shelia. I could just kick myself for not accepting the olive branch she had offered. I couldn't help myself. She hurt Maddie deeply. How do you just forgive that? Now I sit here worrying that Maddie is enduring Shelia's wrath because I acted like a juvenile. "Way to go," I grumble under my breath. My stomach flips when I hear the front door opening. "Hi?" I squeak out when Maddie steps into the foyer.

I blow out a terse breath when she smiles at me while shedding her coat and boots. "Hey," she offers tenderly. "Did you know there is a humungous snowman in the front yard?"

"Yes," I boast proudly. "Andie finished her homework early and I guess we got carried away."

"Slightly," she softly laughs stepping into the living room to join me. "I bet you had a snowball fight afterwards as well."

"During," I boldly confirm. "It isn't entirely all my doing your father was the instigator. Andie is sound asleep. All the hoopla wore her out. Should I ask how dinner went?"

"It was a very nice evening," Maddie responds in bewilderment curling up beside me. "Why didn't you tell me you had lunch with her?"

"I was pissed," I reluctantly inform her. "Not at her at myself. She was nothing but nice and I just didn't want to hear her excuses for being a crappy mother. I stormed out."

"Whatever you said must have made quite an impression," she slowly begins her nimble fingers caress my arm as she speaks. "Apparently telling her off got through to her. Of course I'm not surprised that you defended me or told her to go to hell. Knowing you, Sweetie, I'm just surprised you didn't draw her a map to guide her there."

"Thought about it," I retort my body warming from her touch. "Honestly when she started explaining things all I could think was she is trying to set me up."

"Shea, she probably was," Maddie confirms with a scowl. "Telling her off was the last thing she expected and it definitely made an impression. She asked me about my work and my life. She's never done that before. Time will only tell if she is as sincere as she claims to be. I am so glad you didn't end up becoming my sister."

"Ditto," I laugh. "Did she mention how long she is staying? What about Christmas?"

"Oh she tried to wrangle an invitation, but that would be a very bad idea," Maddie sadly explains.

"It is Christmas," I try to reassure her despite the fact I agree that it would be a bad idea.

"And everyone attending Christmas dinner hates her," Maddie squeaks. "First there is my father. Then there is your father whom she almost married and made his life a living hell. Uhm, and then there is your mother who can't be fond of her. Shall I go on?"

"No need," I concede. "Maybe we could see her earlier or later in the day. As much as I think she is Satan she is your mother and no one should be alone on Christmas."

"That is very generous of you," Maddie nods seemingly lost in her thoughts. "I'll think about it. I just wish I could accept her words and not be suspicious. I don't want to talk about this anymore."

"Oh?" I question not missing the mischievous gleam in her eyes. "What would you like to discuss?"

"Nothing," she asserts cupping my face in her hands. I am breathless my gaze drifting to her soft pink lips. My body quivers when I spy her tongue peeking out to wet those soft, inviting lips just a little. I whimper before I can stop myself. Feeling her breath on my skin is my undoing.

"Oh yeah," I whisper. After all the twists and turns that kept us apart and later brought us together I am still completely enamored with this woman. Her kiss is soft yet demanding. She parts my lips with her tongue while her hands slip down my body. I give in to her touch completely, allowing her to guide me down and straddle my body while our kisses deepen with each caress. My body tingles when I feel her tugging on the hem of my blouse. The cool air greet my flesh when she slowly releases the buttons. I want her so much and to feel all of her right here, but there is one small problem. "Maddie," I gasp my flesh tingling from the feel of her lips teasing my neck. "Sweetie," I pant heavily my body screaming at me for trying to stop what is happening. "We can't," I finally manage to mutter. Each of us release a frustrated groan. "Not here. Andie might wake up."

She smiles down at me while we try to catch our breath. Each of us pauses for a moment looking around and listen carefully for the pitter-patter of little feet. Thankfully the house is quiet. Maddie climbs off of my body offering her hand to me. "Bed?" She invites me in a sultry tone.

The stress of the past few days slips away. The house is quiet and the only sounds I hear are our labored breathing. The door is locked and I have managed to undress Shea in record time. She is lying across the bed naked and I can't stop the erratic beating of my heart. My movements are hurried. I finally shed the last of my clothing before climbing up onto the bed. Her touch warms me. I kiss her eager to feel her flesh pressed against my own. There is nothing more in this world I need except for her.

Our kisses turn feverish; my hands explore the supple curves of her body. I love the feel of her nipples hardening against my touch. I tease her pleased by the soft murmurs she releases. Her body wriggles beneath my own. My pulse is racing, and I can feel her desire brushing against my naked thigh. My own desire reaches the pinnacle.

My kisses drift away from the softness of her lips. She lies helplessly beneath me; my mouth teases her erect buds. I suckle her eagerly swirling my tongue slowly around each nipple while savoring the taste of her skin. Before that day when Shea plowed into my classroom I was clueless as to what it felt like to be in love. Now I know and I can't picture my life without her in it.

Hearing her whispering my name her voice dripping with passion further fuels the flames of my desire. I am unable to resist the stirrings she has inspired. I need all of her. I give into my carnal needs by licking and tasting my way down her long, inviting form. The musky aroma of her desire beckons me. I nestle my small body between her long legs. I blow a warm breath against her mound and lick my lips when her body arches in response.

Her breathing is shallow my name coming in short gasps, She clings to the bedding waiting for my touch. I caress the firm flesh of her backside drawing her closer, my body aching until I taste her. Soft murmurs of pleasure escape from me when I taste her wetness. One taste is not enough. I quickly succumb to my hedonistic desires suckling her throbbing clit urgently and caressing her body my ears filling with her pleas for more. I slip inside of her warmth plunging deep. My tongue teases her engorged nub. I am filled with euphoria from the feel her wetness spilling over me. I continue to pleasure her silently snickering at the way she is muffling her cries of ecstasy with a pillow.

I understand why she is covering the sounds of our passion. It wouldn't bode well if we woke Andie. Neither of us is quiet when we make love, and no one wants to be the one to explain the noise to an over inquisitive eight year old. My face is nestled against her thigh and I take great delight in watching her try to regain her composure. "I love you," I whisper kissing her still quivering thigh. She smiles down at me.

"I love you too," she chokes out. Her voice is raspy and her eyes are still smoldering with desire. "Come here," she beckons me.

"Hmm," I purr while climbing my way up her body. I pull the blankets over us while she kisses my shoulders. "It is late," I caution her but still her fingers wander. "Shea?"

"I know," she grumbles her touch finally ebbing. "It is a school night."

"Literally," I giggle snuggling up against her. "Two more days and then I'm on break. Which reminds me have you thought about what I said?"

"I can't think at the moment," she softly laughs while scratching my scalp. "What?"

"The puppy?" I eagerly pry. I know I am not being fair bringing the subject up when she is vulnerable. "Andie really wants one."

"Not fair," she echoes my thoughts. "A puppy is a lot of responsibility."

"Andie is very mature for her age," I argue. "Shea it is all she has talked about. She even underlined it in her letter to Santa. I told you about my friend from work so it wouldn't come from a puppy farm, and we can hide it at my place. I'm sure Dad won't mind."

She is quiet for a brief moment and I think she has fallen asleep. "Okay," she finally concedes with a sigh. "I'll call Mom and have her watch Andie tomorrow night and we can go pick out the little piddler."

"Thank you," I brightly beam.

"I don't know," I try to argue. I sit next to Maddie while she maneuvers her car in and out of holiday traffic. "The late night yapping, paper training, taking the little bugger out in the cold weather, and don't forget shoe chewing," I try to explain the reasons why getting a dog is a really bad idea.

"We'll just look," she placates me pulling into the long driveway.

"Oh just looking so doesn't work when puppies are involved," I scowl in response. My words are proven true when we take one look at the litter and fall in love with the runt of the litter. "Man," I grumble kicking myself whipping out my checkbook. I hesitate for a moment when I spy the large parents watching me. "How big is he going to get?" I fearfully inquire.

"Shea?" Maddie innocently questions her eyes pleading with me. For a brief moment I wonder just who wants the dog more my daughter or my lover?

"Okay Frank we'll take him," I concede with my reward being the brilliant smile Maddie offers cuddling the golden puppy in her arms. "Now how can I say no to that?" I laugh before I begin to scribble the information on the blank check.

"Are you sure that your father is willing to do this?" I question as we sneak around the back of the house.

"Oh yeah," Maddie blurts out a little too quickly for my tastes. One look in Eddie's eyes and I know that he isn't thrilled.

"You got one," he stammers nervously as Maddie goes about setting up everything for the newest member of our family.

"Did you have a dog?" I question suspiciously.

"Couldn't with all the traveling I do," Eddie confesses. "Why?"

"Oh I was just wondering if Maddie was the one who put the idea in Andie's head," I explain watching my lover frolicking with the puppy.

"Shea I swear it was her idea," Maddie innocently asserts. "True I did jump on the bandwagon, but she was the one who said it first."

"Just checking," I throw up my hands in defeat.

The past couple of days have been a flurry of excitement. I can't wait to see the look on Andie's face on Christmas morning. I've had to remind myself not to pick out any names for the puppy he is, after all, a gift from Santa. Shea finally seems happy with the little guy. I know I pushed her and we argued when I insisted on paying for half of his cost. She finally saw things my way. I have to confess trying to keep the little guy a secret hasn't been easy. It is finally Christmas Eve and we only have a few hours left before we can relieve my poor father from doggie duty.

I can't wait until tomorrow morning. I honestly think I am more excited than Andie is. I get to wake up in Shea's arms and with all of us, including my dad, sitting under the tree opening presents is like a dream come true. The only dim spot has been the incessant calls from my mother. She is still trying to wrangle an invitation to dinner, and has been dropping not to subtle hints that I should convince Shea to marry me.

I finally told her to drop the subject, and not so politely informed her that we would see her Christmas night after we drop Andie off at Garret's. I have to confess that I am going to miss Andie tomorrow night, but spending time alone with Shea is going to be nice. Now all I have to do is convince my father to retire early so Shea and I can play under the mistletoe. I know he was less than pleased when I informed him that during his visit I would be bunking with my lover.

I step into the kitchen and my heart skips a beat when I spy my lover bent over checking on whatever she is baking in the oven. "Speaking of playing," I whisper sneaking up on her. She releases a sharp squeal when I grasp her backside. I laugh when she bolts up almost toppling over. "Hi," I innocently offer.

"Brat," she gasps holding her hand to her heart. She skewers her lips alerting me that I am in serious trouble. I can't help laughing at her attempt to intimidate me.

"Ho ho ho," my father chimes as he enters through the back door his arms loaded down with presents.

Andie races into the kitchen appearing out of nowhere. "Oh," she frowns. "Hello Eddie," she politely greets him with the disappointment clearly written on her face.

"Andie," Shea cautions the youngster.

"What?" Dad frowns.

"I think she thought you were the real deal," I whisper to him while I try to help alleviate his load.

"I see," he smiles giving her a pat on the shoulder. "I'm afraid you have a few more hours before the real Santa arrives. For now you will have to settle for me."

"Do you want to play a game?" Andie brightly questions. It warms my heart that Andie has taken a real shine to my Dad.

"I would love it," Dad eagerly accepts. "I just need to get these presents under the tree then I am all yours young lady."

"Stay away from Sorry the kid is a shark," I caution him while Andie drags him off towards the living room.

"I know," Dad mutters under his breath making his departure.

"Everything smells great. Can I give you a hand?" I offer not missing the mischievous gleam in Shea's eyes.

"You're not getting off that easy," she cautions me. "For now be happy I have something in the oven."

"Don't let me stop you," I concede. "Feel free to bend over again."

"Madeline Spencer you are incorrigible," she huffs with a slight smile. "Keep this up and Santa will be putting coal in your stocking tonight."

"Are you implying that I am being naughty?" I question innocently.

"Maddie," she gasps with a deep blush.

"You my love are very tense," I note watching her fumbling about the kitchen. "I know this is the first time that you have entertained everyone at your home for a holiday gathering, so just tell me what I can do to help?"

"Kiss me?" She meekly requests.

"Anytime," I boldly reassure her before reaching up and drawing her towards me and placing a searing kiss on her soft inviting lips. "Now what else can I do?"

"Hmm," she sighs happily. "Put the cheese and crackers on a platter?"

"I'm on it," I reassure her.

"Think she is asleep?" I nervously question staring up at the ceiling. We listen for any tell tale signs that my angel is awake.

"I hope so," Maddie sighs before taking a bite out of one of the cookies Andie had left for Santa. "How much candy did she sneak?"

"I have no idea," I confess rolling my weary shoulders. "There were so many people I couldn't keep an eye on her."

"It was nice," Maddie smiles wiping the milk from her lips. "Is that enough? I'm stuffed." She inquires pointing to the plate of cookies.

"It should be," I laugh. "It was nice having the whole family here and our friends. I know Garrett and his parents really enjoyed the party. Most of the time they don't get to see Andie until late on Christmas night."

"I almost cried when Andie introduced my Dad as her other Grandpa," Maddie sniffs as she sets about unloading presents from their respective hiding places.

"You're a part of the family," I reassure her.

"This is the first family Christmas Eve I've ever experienced," she shyly confesses. "Dad and I always seem to be on our own. I think he enjoyed it as well. Speaking of Dad, we should go get the fur ball. Despite all of his grumbling I think he is getting attached to the little piddler."

"Yeah," I slowly begin pondering just how we should present the newest member of our little family. "Andie will be up at the crack of dawn which is only a couple of hours away so how should we wrap the little guy?"

"Good question," Maddie concurs. "We could put him and a stack of papers along with his crate in the kitchen. Dad said he is getting better at waiting. Not great mind you, but better. It always looks so sweet on television a small child waking up on Christmas morning greeted by a puppy with a big bow around its neck."

"Yeah, that's because they edit out the part with poopie papers," I grunt. "I'll get the pooper just say a prayer that he doesn't eat his bow."

I am filled with a mixture of exhaustion and bliss as I trudge through the snow towards Maddie's house. It was a nice night with everyone singing and laughing. Things couldn't have gone better. The only hitch was Shelia's constant calling until Maddie had the good sense to shut off her cell phone. It was a major effort to get Andie to go to bed. She was keyed up from all the sugar and excitement of the holiday plus playing with her cousins didn't help calm her down either. I finally had to mention that Santa wouldn't show up until she was asleep. I almost laughed when her tiny face filled with panic and she dashed upstairs.

Eddie seems resistant when I arrive to claim the puppy. Maddie was right he has grown attached to the little fur ball. "I think it would be nice if Andie woke up and found him," I finally explain and he relents. I have to admit the little bundle of fur is absolutely adorable. "Just promise me you won't eat your bow or make a mess?" I implore the yapping little guy after I get him and his gear settled into the kitchen. My heart melts when a pair of big, brown eyes stare up at me. I know what he is trying to say, I'm asking far too much and I'll spend the better part of Christmas morning cleaning up after him.

"Oh well," I concede while scratching his ears. "You are going to make my two favorite ladies very happy and you're cute."

"So are you," I hear purr from behind me.

"Hey Babe," I smile over at her drinking in the sight of her illuminated by the soft lighting. "How did I get so lucky?"

"I'm the lucky one," she smiles brightly. "Everything is set up, batteries installed, candles extinguished, lights turned off and the doors and windows locked. Ready for bed?"

"Always," I coo in response.

I take her by the hand and lead her up to our bedroom. Curious that even though it is technically my room I think of it as ours. We take our time undressing one another. It is late the day is wearing on the both of us. I am well aware that dawn and a hyper eight year old are just a few short hours away. Still I can't resist touching her lowering her down onto the bed and covering her body with my own.

Our caresses are slow and deliberate. It still amazes me that somehow from the first time we knew just how to touch the other. I can feel her hands slipping between our bodies. She glides lower parting my slick folds. I mirror her actions. Our bodies are pressed so tightly together I can feel her heart beating in unison with my own. The moment is sheer perfection as we tease and stroke each other until each of us release strangled cries. It probably isn't the best sex we've ever shared yet the intense intimacy shatters my heart.

The need for sleep and the quickly approaching dawn loom over us. I am not only content, but thrilled to simply cradle Maddie in my arms as we drift off to sleep.

"Mommy!" Is shouted a tiny fist pounds on the bedroom door. My eyes open slightly the world still a blur as the insistent pleas continue. "It's for you," I croak out my voice still raw from the lack of slumber and passion.

"Wrong, it is for us," Shea taunts until I finally blink open my eyes. My heart swells when I find myself gazing into her azure eyes. "Merry Christmas," I gush.

"Merry Christmas," she echoes her hands already in motion exploring my naked body. We kiss for a brief moment. I give into the delightful sensations she is causing until another loud bang and Andie's voice disrupt our bliss. "Do we get combat pay for Christmas morning?"

"No," she laughs. "But I will make coffee. Andrea!" She bellows suddenly. "We are awake. There is no need to keep banging on the door."

I stifle a laugh when I detect grumbling from the hallway before a pair of tiny feet stomp off. "Wow, I thought it was hard dealing with kids in my class right before the holiday. I had no idea what it was like once I sent them home."

"Welcome to parenthood my love," Shea laughs.

"I'm loving every minute of it," I confess.

We hastily dress and rush downstairs in search of a certain little girl. My heart swells once again when I spy Andie nestled beneath the large tree cuddling her puppy. Shea grunts as we notice that the floppy eared little darling is gnawing on the tree.

"Look what Santa brought!" Andie squeals shattering our eardrums. "He got my letter."

"I told you," I placate the exuberant youngster who is squeezing the life out of the squirming puppy.

"I'll get the coffee," Shea yawns after snapping a quick picture of Andie and her new friend.

"What is her name?" Andie yammers on.

"His name is up to you," I correct her stretching out my weary body. "Honey you are squeezing him too tightly."

"Sorry," she gushes easing her grasp on the helpless puppy.

"Andie, Santa brought you a lot of other stuff," Shea carefully begins when she rejoins us. "I'm sure the puppy can help you open your other gifts. I think Santa might have brought some stuff for him as well."

"Come on Harry," Andie beams. "We need to hand out presents."

"Harry," Shea sighs heavily.

"Harry Potter," Andie dutifully explains.

"You owe me a dollar," I whisper proudly.

"You suck," she grunts in response while bending over to help Andie organize the massive array of gifts.

I know that I wasn't playing fair but what else would a kid these days name her puppy? I don't teach second grade for nothing. "Can I bring Harry to Daddy's?" Andie innocently questions as both Shea and I flinch.

"I think we should let Harry get used to his new house," Shea tries to explain. We already broached the subject with Garrett last night. His response was an out and out no.

"But Mommy," Andie whines. "Harry will be lonely tonight."

"Oh boy," Shea whimpers. "Maddie and I will be here to take care of him. It is only one night. Harry needs a lot of care you are going to have to learn what he needs. He is a big responsibility young lady. I think it would be best if he stayed here tonight."

"But," Andie whines. "Maybe I shouldn't sleep at Daddy's tonight."

"I think your Daddy would be very sad if you didn't," I quickly interject. *'Now I know why parents travel in pairs. Just so every once in awhile you can say you're it,'* I mentally assess still Andie pleads her case.

"Andrea," Shea finally huffs. "We can talk about this later. Right now wouldn't you like to give Maddie the present you got her," she finally puts her foot down.

We both know by the impish grin on Andie's face that the conversation is far from over. Shea and I silently agree that we'll let Garrett be the bad guy when he comes to pick up Andie at her grandparents. The rest of the morning is pure bliss. The multitude of presents from Shea, Andie

and the rest of the Collins clan overwhelm me. The morning is even more special when my father joins us.

I get a little misty when Dad volunteers to help Andie take Harry out for his first official walk. I am amazed by the way Andie gathers everything that she will need to take care of Harry's needs. Shea and I spend the time cleaning up the pile of discarded wrapping paper and sipping coffee under the Christmas tree. We exchange a kiss just as Andie and crew return.

"Eww," Andie giggles after catching us smooching.

"Busted," Shea snickers. "How did Harry do?"

"He is very smart," Andie boasts proudly.

"Andie did everything just right," Dad reassures us. "If I didn't know better I'd think she studied up on how to take care of a puppy."

"Interesting," Shea slowly responds eyeing me in a suspicious manner.

"What?" I feign innocence. "Coffee Dad?"

"I'd love a cup," he laughs heartily.

"Uh huh," Shea snorts before dragging Andie upstairs so they can get ready for dinner.

Dinner with my family was truly amazing. Having my entire family, including my lover and her father, gathered around the tree was something out of a Norman Rockwell painting. The only thing that troubled me was the way Andie double teamed Garrett and I regarding Harry. I tried to stay firm, but Garrett folded like a wet napkin. I am going to have to sit my little angel down and have a long talk with her. But then again at least Maddie and I won't be on puppy duty tonight.

After the joyous night we crashed into the darkness better known as Shelia. Despite her vow to behave better she was still the same old conniving wench she always was. It just burned me up the way she would slip in little barbs directed towards Maddie. My lover, to her credit, just let it roll off her back.

All in all everything went as smoothly as possible if we ignored Shelia's obvious disdain for our lifestyle. The only time I was certain that there was going to be bloodshed was when I discovered that Shelia had managed, in just a few short days, to max out my Visa card. No small feat. I don't know which was worse Shelia's extravagance or the spat Maddie and I had over splitting the cost of her mother's visit.

The situation was finally defused when I agreed to allow Maddie to switch the room to her credit card. I didn't really have a choice. When I put the room and Shelia's expenses on my Amex

would have been like giving a killer a gun. Given Maddie's limited income I know it won't take her dear, sweet mother long to put her daughter in debt.

It pisses me off the way this woman just doesn't care. Adding grist to the mill is that no matter how blunt we were she wouldn't give us the slightest hint as to just how long she would be visiting. Not much we can do about it other than letting her stay with us. I can't foresee that happening without bloodshed.

After Sheila's seventh or eighth Manhattan she was finally ready to pass out and we dumped her in her room. The drive to our home was silent and awkward with each of us wondering if Sheila was planning on bleeding us dry, and if I was going to have to take out a second mortgage just to support the nasty, old witch.

Upon our arrival home we find Eddie waiting for us. I like Eddie, and I understand that he is leaving the day after tomorrow and would like to spend time with his daughter, but so would I. Andie will be returning with Harry in the morning so tonight is one of those few nights when Maddie and I can really enjoy ourselves. Call me a pig, but I love hearing my lover cry out in ecstasy. Normally we have to be very quiet and limit our lovemaking to the bedroom.

"Dad, it is late," Maddie finally interrupts him.

"Oh?" He responds in confusion as I blush. I say a silent prayer that he never knows why we are kicking him out into the cold, dark night. I feel my stomach churn when his jaw drops slightly. "I understand," he mumbles his discomfort more than a little obvious.

"We will see you for breakfast," Maddie offers with a slight tremor. She rises to see him to the door.

"Sure, bright and early," he quickly recovers.

"God that was embarrassing," she sputters lingering in the doorway that separates the kitchen from the living room. "I was tempted to smack him in the head and say get out I want to have sex with my girlfriend."

"Do you now?" I tease her before I climb off the sofa. "What if I'm not in the mood?"

"Oh well I guess I'll just have to take matters into my own hands," she boldly theorizes. My jaw quivers; I watch her hand gliding across the front of her blouse. "Which would be a shame since I am standing under the mistletoe," she calmly continues while unbuttoning her blouse.

"Yes you are," I squeak out watching her filling her hands with her breasts. I lick my lips my eyes riveted to the sight of her touching herself. I close the distance between us. "My God," I sputter looming dangerously close to her watching her clothing fall to the floor. "You have no idea how many times I fanaticized about this when we were teenagers."

"Tell me?" She entreats me rolling her nipples between her nimble fingers.

"Madeline Spencer," I slowly begin my heart hammering against my chest. "You have no idea how many times I waited for you to leave our room so I could do what you are doing now. But this isn't what draws me to you. What draws me to you is you. Everything about you makes me feel amazing."

I feel my body tensing when she suddenly halts her movements and her face dims. "Shea I don't want to spoil this moment, but I need to ask you something," she slowly begins. I hold my breath waiting for my world to collapse. "Have you ever thought about having another child?"

"Are you pregnant?" I gasp teasing her for a moment. I am filled with relief when she laughs.

"No," she reassures me. "I was thinking, I've been thinking about this."

"Well, I'd love to give Andie another brother or sister, but I have to be honest I'm not really excited about being pregnant again," I confess. "Trust me I'm not a joy to be around when I am expecting."

"What if I was pregnant, and I'm not talking about now or this year, but what if?" She implores me.

I want to cry as I ponder how truly beautiful she would look carrying our child. "I want," I begin trying to select my words carefully. "Madeline I would love to add to our family and is it too soon to ask my brothers to kick in the DNA?"

"Yes," she laughs. "I'm sorry to bring this up now. I never thought I'd feel safe enough, but I really want this, though only with you. I love Andie as if she was my own, and I want more."

"Madeline," I beam down at her. "I've wanted forever with you since the first moment I saw you. We can wait, and yes I want to expand our family. You are my family."

"Damn, there you go saying all the right things again," she blushes. "Now how can I thank you."

"I have a list," I purr my voice deepening from the sight of her naked body displayed before me. "For now you can go back to showing me how much you want me."

"I didn't spoil the mood by bringing up such a serious subject?" She smiles with relief.

"It is never the wrong time to tell me what you feel," I reassure her. My hands caress the supple curves of her body. "If you want we can keep discussing this."

"Later," she responds crinkling her nose in the most adorable fashion. She presses the palms of her hands against my shoulders. "For now I'd rather show you how I am feeling."

The kiss is soft and promising; my hands continue exploring her body. "Now this is Christmas," I sigh happily nuzzling her neck. "Standing under the mistletoe with a half naked blonde, who I happen to be madly in love with, I must have been very good this year."

"Ms. Griffin you have been positively enchanting this year," she murmurs her eyes glimmering with desire. "So good in fact that I got an email from Santa."

"Santa has an email account does he?" I jest while slipping her clothing from her body.

"But of course," she asserts playfully; her hands busy themselves with the hem of my blouse. "He said that you have been so good that I should let you have anything you wish."

"That certainly opens up an endless list of possibilities," I murmur while trailing my tongue along the nape of her neck.

"Anything," she gasps her skin prickling beneath my touch.

"We have the house to ourselves and my girlfriend has just offered me anything I desire," I ponder the possibilities kicking her discarded clothing aside. I fill my hands with her breasts teasing her erect nipples. Her body wriggles against my own teasing her. "Turn around," I whisper hotly in her ear. She releases a deep moan complying with my wishes. She clasps the doorframe; my hands glide down her back. I cup her firm backside her soft murmurs are music to my ears. My hands grope her quivering flesh slipping around her waist until I am, once again, caressing her breasts. Her hips jerk and she grinds her body against my own. I can feel my desire mounting. I nudge her thighs apart. She rocks against my thigh and I can feel how much she wants me. Her wetness seeps through the thick material of my slacks.

I nuzzle her neck nipping tenderly at the flesh her body gyrating against me as I tease her. My name escapes from her lips. My hand glides down the front of her body until the tips of my fingers brush against her wetness. I thrust against her body matching her frantic rhythm. I slowly part her slick folds. I glide my finger along her sex my senses reeling from the feel of her body rocking urgently.

I capture her throbbing clit between my fingers pinching and teasing it before I begin to stroke the throbbing bundle slowly. "Oh Shea," she stammers; her wetness greeting my touch. I refuse to hurry taunting her with the tenderness of my touch. She groans with disappointment when my touch leaves her. I bring my fingers to my lips and lick her passion swirling my tongue along each digit until her taste is gone.

My hand drifts down her back cupping her firm backside and massaging her flesh. She begs me for more. Her wetness fills my hand when I cup her mound. My body is humming with raw passion as I tease her. She cries out when I slip inside of her warmth wiggling my fingers. Her body jerks backward in an attempt to feel more of my touch.

I can feel the wall already tightening around my fingers. I plunge in and out of her. "I love you," I moan fighting against the way my body is demanding release. She is screaming my name encouraging me to take her harder. My knees are shaking as I guide her over the edge. Her bliss is captivating and I am unable to ebb my touch. The room is spinning and still I take all that she has to offer.

She blindly reaches up grasping my hair tugging me closer until she is devouring my lips with her own. I am caught up in the fiery kiss dimly aware she has slipped from my grasp. I feel my body being pushed backward my clothing being torn from my body. I release a sharp gasp when I find myself lying on the floor and my lover straddling my body. Her eyes are on fire she rips open my clothing.

I give into her smoldering passion allowing her to take whatever she desires. I am lying half naked on the floor. Maddie's lips and tongue savagely attack my newly exposed flesh. I claw at the carpeting when I feel her breath teasing my wetness and her hair tickling my quivering thighs. I can't focus and I can barely breathe. She slips inside of me. Her fingers plunge deeper and her mouth is feasting upon my aching need. I fight to keep control, but it is a lost cause when I feel her teeth grazing against my engorged nub. My throat is raw I know that I am screaming yet I am unaware of the words I am uttering. The only sound I can distinguish is the pounding of my heart.

The world has dimmed my body a quivering mass. "Oh my God," I finally manage to choke out as my vision clears. Maddie is looking down upon me, gloating, her eyes still shimmering with passion. "Bed," I growl. It is not a request.

"Take me," she encourages.

I stumble as we gather up the tattered remains of our clothing and drag one another up the staircase. We lock the door behind us out of habit before becoming lost in another smoldering kiss. I cannot wait to reach the bed she is on the floor kneeling before me. I sink to my knees and guide her down onto the carpet. I nestle my body between her trembling thighs and drink in the delightful aroma of her passion. I want to take things slowly yet I am unable to curb my desire. I bury my face in her passion and suckle her eagerly.

I curl my tongue pressing against the opening to her warm, wet center. I hold her tightly. I plunge inside of her. I take her deeper my touch unrelenting until our bodies erupt in unison. I sigh contently resting my head on her stomach.

"Rug burn?" She teases while lacing her fingers through my hair.

"Don't care," I murmur happily.

"Good," she lightly laughs. "Because I don't think we are going to make it to the bed anytime soon."

"Perfect," I eagerly agree briefly wondering if I am going to survive until morning.

Send comments to findingmavis@comcast.net

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