



LET IT
SNOW...

.....
LESLIE KELLY
JENNIFER LABRECQUE



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Let It Snow...: The Prince
who Stole Christmas

Аннотация

The Prince Who Stole Christmas by Leslie Kelly When charming Prince Philip decides he wants to find true love rather than being married for his crown, he heads for the magical land of New York City. There, during the holiday season, he meets and woos Claire Hoffman, the perfect girl for him...who might or might not think he's crazy when he reveals who he really is, and where he comes from! My True Love Gave to Me... by Jennifer LaBrecque Gertrude 'Gertie' Brown had been in love with Knox Whitaker for what feels like her entire life. She'd wanted a life with Knox. But when he suffers the loss of his grandmother he becomes someone she doesn't recognise. Gertie tries to forget him and move on with her life yet she always feels as if there's a piece missing...

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About the Authors

LESLIE KELLY has written dozens of books and novellas for Mills & Boon[®] Blaze[®]. Known for her sparkling dialogue, fun characters and depth of emotion, her books have been honored with numerous awards, including a National Readers' Choice Award, an *RT Book Reviews* Award, and three nominations for the highest recognition in romance, the RWA RITA[®] Award. Leslie lives in Maryland with her own romantic hero, Bruce, and their three daughters. Visit her online at www.lesliekelly.com or at her blog, www.plotmonkeys.com.

After a varied career path that included barbecue-joint waitress, corporate numbers cruncher, and bug business maven, **JENNIFER LABRECQUE** has found her true calling writing contemporary romance. Named 2001 Notable New Author of the Year and 2002 winner of the prestigious Maggie Award for Excellence, she is also a two-time RITA[®] Award finalist. Jennifer lives in suburban Atlanta with a Chihuahua who runs the whole show.

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The Prince Who Stole Christmas

Leslie Kelly

My True Love Gave To Me...

Jennifer LaBrecque



www.millsandboon.co.uk

The Prince Who Stole Christmas

Leslie Kelly

To Bruce. Thanks for being my prince
and for giving me my happily ever after.

Prologue

ONCE UPON A TIME, in a faraway land, in a world called Elatyria, there lived a handsome prince who believed in true love.

This prince had been raised by parents who adored each other. Their lives were filled with love, joy and happiness. He had always looked forward to the day when he would meet his own soul mate, with whom he could share his life and his kingdom.

Unfortunately, though he tried and tried, the prince could not find a bride who loved him for himself. All the eligible maidens he met proved to be more interested in his crown, his palaces and his lands than in his person.

Growing discouraged, he began to cast off his royal duties and go out into the world to meet as many women as he could, looking for his one-and-only, forever love—and finding along the way a lot of one-of-many, for today lovers.

With his parents aging, and his kingdom needing an heir, the prince realized the time had come to settle down and do his duty. Relenting to family pressure, he agreed to make one last foray into the wide world in search of his soul mate. If she was not to be found, he promised to marry a girl his parents chose for him.

With time running out, the prince had one last hope, and one final place to go to try to find the woman of his dreams....

A magical city called New York.

1

“IF I DON’T COME UP WITH the money, I’m in big trouble.”

Claire Hoffman had been trying to ignore her brother, Freddy, who had burst into the kitchen of her candy shop, ranting about his latest financial emergency. It was under four weeks until Christmas; she had a ton of work to do, and no time to deal with his histrionics.

But unlike usual Freddy’s tone, he didn’t sound cajoling and playful now. He sounded serious. Very serious.

Her hand shook, ever so slightly, but enough to sabotage the delicate lacework icing she’d been applying to a tray of tiny petits fours. She lowered the icing bag. “What are you talking about?”

Ignoring her for a moment, Freddy grabbed a café con leche truffle—one of her specialties—and stuffed it into his mouth.

“Freddy?” she snapped.

“I’m starving. I don’t even have money to feed myself.”

She didn’t ask why. Freddy made a fair wage ushering at one of the theaters on Broadway, but whatever he made was never enough to keep him solvent between paychecks. Which was why she hadn’t immediately panicked when he’d burst in a few minutes ago, looking for cash. She was used to slipping him a twenty she could hardly spare, knowing the money was worth avoiding the nagging.

But she suspected a twenty wasn't going to cut it this time.

"What have you done?"

He finished chewing, then looked down at his feet, scuffing them on the floor. It might have been cute when he was ten and, five years older, Claire was practically raising him, since their delicate, prima ballerina mother was so often ill. But it wasn't cute now that he was twenty-one, and a lazy, often unemployed college dropout who seemed happy to coast through life.

After he'd spent his share of their mom's life insurance policy, he'd started bumming from Claire's. Now that she had invested every penny in updating the ancient building her uncle had left her, and starting her shop, I Want Candy, she could no longer serve as Freddy's ATM. "What. Have. You. Done?"

"It shoulda been a sure thing. I mean, that race..."

"Jesus, Freddy!"

A flush rose up his neck, mottling his cheeks.

"How much did you lose?"

"Well, it wasn't so much the race...."

She reached for a truffle and bit into it, then grabbed another one. She needed to busy her hands so she wouldn't strangle him, and busy her mouth so she wouldn't scream.

"See, when I realized how deep I was in, I went to leverage what I had left on last weekend's NFL games."

He snagged a petit four. She snatched it back. "*How much?*"

He mumbled a reply, so softly she couldn't be sure she'd heard right. *Oh, God, please let me not have heard right.* "What?"

“Um... ten large.”

“Tell me you mean ten oversize one-dollar bills.”

He shook his head, looking miserable. “Ten grand.”

The truffles threatened to come back up. For a moment Claire couldn't think. As if on autopilot, she reached for a nearby bottle of Grand Marnier she'd used in the truffles, twisted off the top and swallowed several mouthfuls. The liqueur burned a fiery path down her throat, snapping her out of her lethargy.

Setting the bottle down, she stretched her hands out and strode toward her brother, ready to choke him.

“Hey,” he cried, shuffling backward. “What are you doing?”

“Strangling you. Your life insurance is paid up, right?”

“That's not funny.”

“You think I'm joking? I am mad enough to kill you, Freddy!”

“I'm sorry,” he squealed.

Her fury seeped out of her. “How could you do this?” she mumbled, collapsing onto a stool in front of the counter.

Of all people, Freddy should *know* better. But the fact that their gambler father had lost all his money and died of a stroke at fifty apparently hadn't taught him anything.

“I didn't mean to. Claire, you gotta help me. If I don't make good, the Rat King is gonna send the Nutcracker after me.”

She gaped at her brother. “The *who* is going to send the *what*?”

“The Rat King's a bookie. The Nutcracker is his enforcer.”

Torn between wanting to burst into hysterical laughter or scream, she stared at her imbecilic sibling. “The *Nutcracker*?”

“Yeah. He got his name because if you don’t pay, he, uh...”

Claire waved a hand. “I think I can figure it out.” Considering she’d often thought her brother needed to grow a pair, she wasn’t sure the collector would be cracking much.

“I can’t help you,” she stated calmly.

Freddy’s eyes rounded into saucers. “*What?*”

“I have barely enough to cover my expenses for the rest of the month. I’m counting on a big holiday season to make this place pay. My lines of credit are totally tapped out.”

“You could rent the upstairs apartments...”

“No.” The argument was a familiar one. “They’re one step up from needing to be condemned.”

“Come on, it’s Midtown. People would pay five grand a month for the location alone. Screw the peeling paint on the walls!”

It wasn’t just peeling paint. Her great-uncle Harry had left her the run-down property, but no cash. Her mother’s life insurance had given her enough money to get the first-floor shop renovated, along with the apartment behind it, where Claire now lived, but nothing else. The upstairs units—two on each level, going up three floors—were uninhabitable. Squatters living up there had had the good sense to move out, driven away by the frigid air that poured through the cracked windows. Then there were the holes in the walls, the mildewed bathrooms and the drooping wallpaper. Not a pretty picture. Someday, when the shop was thriving, she’d have enough money to continue the renovations and make the whole building a lucrative investment. But not now.

The only way she could get any money out of this place would be if she agreed to sell it to the investor who'd been coming around a lot in the last month. Yet the idea of giving up her chance to build a future for herself made her heart clench. Especially if she had to do it to bail out her idiot brother.

Claire got so tired of taking care of him... of everyone. When their mother had gotten sick, Claire had been the one to nurse her. When her father had lost his money, she'd started working to help support the family. When they were both gone and it was just her and Freddy, she'd become a mother to a teenager, when she wasn't much past her own teenage years.

She was tired. So damn tired of being the caretaker. It had been such a long time since anyone had taken care of *her*, she honestly didn't remember what it felt like.

"Freddy, even if I would *consider* renting them, I couldn't get the permits. Everything above this floor is a ruin." Seeing him about to speak again, she threw a hand up. "And no, I'm not renting under the table. Legal trouble is the last thing I need."

"So what am I supposed to do?" he asked, sounding petulant.

She bit her tongue to prevent herself from suggesting that he grow the hell up, be a man and deal with his own problems.

"What about a payment plan?" she asked. "You could promise to give him a certain amount of your paycheck every week...."

Her brother rolled his eyes. "Bookies don't finance."

"You've got no other options. You have to at least ask."

If the "Rat King" said no, then she'd go into full panic mode

and start considering selling organs on the black market. She could think of a few of Freddy's that could be spared, like his useless brain.

Otherwise... was she prepared to give up everything she'd worked so hard for to save her brother's bacon? *Again?*

Oh, God, she hoped it wouldn't come to that. She just had to pray that in this magical season of giving, the *rat* discovered he had a heart, and the *nutcracker* went on vacation.

But she wasn't counting on it. This might be the time for miracles, but Claire had stopped believing in those long ago. She'd never been the type to fantasize about some rich Prince Charming galloping in on his white steed to take care of all her problems. And she sure didn't expect one now.

"MY PRINCE, please reconsider. We can't possibly live *here*."

Philip Nadir, crowned prince of the Kingdom of Selandria of the Dry Lands, heard the dismay in the voice of his loyal but fastidious companion, Shelby, and smiled. "Of course we can, and we shall. This will do quite well," he said as he watched his bodyguard, Phateen—also called Teeny—enter, muscling a mattress through the doorway. "Perhaps we should leave that until Shelby clears away the debris on the floor?" he suggested, remembering the condition of the small sleeping chamber, which he'd seen on a tour of the building yesterday.

"Until *who* clears away the debris?" the man squealed.

"Are you saying *I* should do it?"

“Of course not, my prince. But I can’t be expected to...”

Quirking a brow, Philip stared at Shelby, who was almost as spoiled as Philip was *accused* of being, and harder to please. A cousin, Shelby had come to visit when they were children, and had never left. Most looked upon him as a servant; Philip called him friend. But he could be—how did they say it?—high maintenance.

“Do you want to go back to Elatyrria?”

A rueful frown pulled at the other man’s face. He had been adamant that he be allowed to come along on this quest—Philip’s last chance to find a woman he could love, who would love him for himself—but so far he wasn’t acting very happy about it.

“No, Your Highness. But surely a scullery wench...”

“We’re supposed to be poor, struggling students. Poor people can’t afford to hire, uh, I believe the term is *cleaning* ladies.”

Shelby huffed. Never having been to this world before, he was having difficulty adjusting, daunted by the tall buildings, the crowds, the frantic pace and the lack of subservience.

Philip, on the other hand, was having the time of his life.

Though he’d been raised in Elatyrria, he was fond of Earth, a world that somehow existed, as his father’s sorcerer described it, “One plane over from our reality.” He had been here a few times before, but only with guards and servants.

He had never been one to complain about the weight of his responsibilities, and had been the first to appreciate the benefits that came with being the bachelor prince of one of the richest

kingdoms in his world. But until now he'd never understood the joy of walking down a public thoroughfare and being jostled by strangers, or of flipping a worthless piece of paper at someone and being given something called a hot dog. Escaping his usual retinue for this quest to find his bride was giving him the chance to be completely free. And what better time than during one of the most popular holiday seasons of this world? New York was bedecked with lights and decorations, and populated by happy, smiling people. He loved it already.

Shelby toggled a button on the wall that was supposed to send light flooding out of the ceiling. "Why won't this work?"

"Hmm." Philip walked over and tried it himself. Nothing happened.

Though it was only late afternoon, the shadows of evening were drawing close. The air was chilly, so apparently the heating apparatus wasn't working. He wasn't used to cold weather, being from a dry, desertlike kingdom, but knew he could "rough it," as the locals said, for a night or so. But Shelby was another story.

"I'll go downstairs and talk to the innkeeper," he declared, wanting to confirm a few more details with that man, a Mr. Freddy Hoffman. Philip had thought Hoffman would be here today for their move-in. But he had seen neither hide nor hair of him since yesterday, when Philip had met him and paid a month's rent, plus something called "security," for both the second-floor living units, one for him, one for Shelby and Teeny.

"Do start working on the debris, won't you?" Philip said as

he exited.

He walked down the dingy corridor to the back stairway. If he wasn't mistaken, Mr. Hoffman had said this stairwell led to the first-floor shop and the owner's apartment.

Moving carefully down the steps, he frowned, feeling the sag of the boards beneath his feet and hearing their noisy creaks. He reached the bottom level, coming to a long, narrow hallway, shadowy and cluttered. At the far end was a door that led outside to a back alley. In the opposite direction was the front entrance to the building. In between were two other doors, the nearest marked Private. Another, closer to the front, was marked I Want Candy: Deliveries.

From behind it he could hear music. The sound grew louder as he approached, so he knocked once, then pushed the door open.

The music was much louder in here, and the smooth-voiced female singer was purring to someone she called Santa Baby, inviting him to leave her gifts. Philip placed the reference, though he was unaccustomed to hearing seductive songs about Santa Claus, a character most thought an American invention. But who, Philip knew, actually resided in one of the icy northern kingdoms of Elatyria.

Suddenly, that sultry tone was made sultrier by the addition of another female voice. He couldn't help moving into the main part of the large kitchen, intrigued by the throaty, feminine sound. He didn't see a duo of women performing, only the one. The instrumentation, and the first voice, emerged from a small

electronic box. The other singer stood in front of a tall counter that was laden with sweets, and was singing along as she worked.

Singing very well. Working very hard.

Looking utterly beautiful.

Philip was used to the perfection of princesses who would never be seen without elaborately coiffed hair or elegant, bejeweled gowns. Who would never allow a potential suitor to behold them in a state like this. But never had he seen a woman who so immediately appealed to him on such a deep, visceral level.

Her mass of dark brown hair strained to free itself from a haphazard bun, a few tendrils brushing her high cheekbones. The face was arresting—not perfect, he supposed, but very attractive, with soft cheeks, a pert nose, and a wide, sensuous mouth. Her eyes were deep-set, green or blue, and ringed with thick, dark lashes, and her high brow furrowed as she concentrated on a tricky bit of work she was doing on a delicacy before her.

She continued to sing, and as she finished dabbling some icing on a sweet, she added a toss of her head and a swivel of her hips in time with the beat.

The toss caught his attention, making him wonder if all that glorious hair would tumble down about her shoulders. The swivel *kept* his attention, for he hoped it would be repeated.

Because, oh, did the woman have swiveling hips. She was incredibly curvaceous. The smock she wore over her simple clothing emphasized the smallness of her waist compared to the

curve of her hips and backside. Not to mention the fullness of her breasts, the tops of which peeked above the apron.

She was also tall—very tall, compared to most women in his world—and if they were to stand facing each other, their noses would almost touch. Other parts would line up equally well. Some of those other parts reacted to that thought, until his newly purchased “Jean” pants—who Jean was and why men’s pants were named after her, he did not know—began to tighten.

The stranger crooned even louder, and Philip couldn’t help thinking about what he’d like to slip her under her tree. Before he could clear his throat to warn her of his presence, she turned to retrieve something, and saw him standing there watching her.

“Oh, my God!” she cried, dropping a chocolate-smearred spoon onto the counter. Immediately backing up, she almost tripped over her own feet, and began looking around the room, as if wanting a sharp implement with which to defend herself.

“My apologies. I didn’t mean to startle you,” he said, lifting both hands in a gesture he’d learned meant *No harm, no foul*, though what that expression meant, exactly, he wasn’t sure. Still, it seemed appropriate for the situation.

“Who are you? What do you want?”

“I’m seeking Mr. Hoffman. Freddy Hoffman.”

She studied him, her gaze dropping to his shoulders and chest, assessing. Well used to female appreciation, Philip allowed a slight smile to begin curving his lips.

She, on the other hand, began to frown. In fact, a scowl tugged

at her beautiful face, as if she were most displeased with his appearance. That, he was *not* used to. One of his brows shot up in surprise. Though not a vain man, he was certainly not accustomed to disdain from women.

“You’re *him*, right?”

“I believe you mean to say ‘You’re he.’”

“Are you seriously lecturing me on grammar right now?”

“‘Twasn’t a lecture,” he said, amused by her disgruntled tone.

“Merely a correction.”

“Jeez, I’m being *corrected* by a thug.”

“A... What did you call me?”

“A thug.” She spat out the word. “That’s what you are, isn’t it?”

Oh, you might call yourself an enforcer, or a bill collector, but we both know the truth, don’t we, Mr. Nutcracker?”

Nutcracker? What an unusual name.

Though Philip was very confused now, he had to admit the sparkle in the woman’s eyes and the flush of color on her cheeks were most becoming. If anything, she was even prettier now that she was indignant. Though what had caused the indignation, he didn’t know. Perhaps it was the aforementioned Mr. Nutcracker.

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” she said, moving closer as she scolded. Close enough for him to see her eyes and note they were neither blue nor green, but rather a combination of the two. They brought to mind the color of the Great Elatyrian Sea under a sunny, clear sky. *Beautiful*.

“Why should I be ashamed, exactly?”

“Because you take advantage of people.”

“I most certainly do not,” he said, his shoulders stiffening in rising annoyance. “I would never dream of forcing someone to do anything he or she hadn’t agreed to.”

“Agreed to. Right. Like anybody agrees to get wiped out.”

Wiped out? He wasn’t familiar with that expression. But before he could ask her about it, she jabbed an index finger in his direction. “How do you people live with yourselves?”

“We people?” He was about to explain that royals rarely lived by themselves, that there were lots of people in the palaces and castles. His was a large family; though Philip was an only child, he had many cousins and other relations.

But he remembered at the last moment that he was supposed to be a poor student from another land—he’d even picked one out of an atlas—and shook his head sadly. “Only with great difficulty.”

“No kidding. I don’t know how you can sleep at night.”

“I sleep very well,” he told her, wondering how she slept. And where she slept. And who she slept with.

Oh yes, he wanted very much to know that. Especially because, despite the fact that she was scolding him for some reason, and that her accusations had begun to annoy him, he couldn’t deny that he quite adored the passion in her eyes and the way her glorious lips pursed when she was angry.

“I don’t see how, considering the way you people prey on naive, brainless twenty-one-year-olds.”

“Brainless?” he asked, unaccustomed to the slang here. He didn’t imagine she meant that literally, but one never knew. There had been, of course, that straw man in his world.

“Yeah. He’s not smart enough to deal with the likes of you and your boss.”

“I don’t have a boss.”

“Strictly contract work, huh?”

More confusing by the moment. But it seemed safe to simply agree. “I suppose you could say that.”

“That’s disgusting.”

Well, *that* had been the wrong answer. But Philip didn’t persist, nor did he question her. In honesty, he was barely paying attention anymore to the strange things she said. He was focused only on the strength in her voice, the stiffness in her posture, the belligerence of her words. And the way all those things combined to make her one dazzlingly exciting female.

He stepped closer, drawn to the fire in her, the fervency in her tone—the disrespect, the near dislike—shocking and attracting him all at once. Very rarely had a woman spoken to him in such a manner. In fact, he could recall only one, a feisty historian he’d met a few months before. This woman reminded him of her in some ways. She had... spirit.

His tread quiet on the floor, courtesy of his new, rubber-soled shoes—supposedly a staple of college students—Philip continued to move toward her. He heard her tiny gasp and knew she was alarmed. But he also saw the way her lips parted, her

small tongue slipping out to moisten them. Her pulse fluttered in her throat as her breathing quickened, and the warm pink color in her cheeks deepened to crimson the closer he came.

So, the fiery stranger was not immune to him, as much as she might wish otherwise.

“Don’t come any closer,” she ordered, though her voice quavered. She reached down and picked up the spoon she’d dropped, leaving a thin trail of gooey, liquid chocolate on the countertop. Ignoring that, she waved the spoon at him threateningly, sending a few tiny droplets his way. One landed on his shirt, another on his lower lip.

Philip had always had a weakness for chocolate. As a child, he’d often sneaked into the kitchens and filched desserts, which his father had said was unbecoming of a prince. There was just something decadent about chocolate, something forbidden, dark, slick and luscious. It appealed to all his senses.

He licked his mouth, tasting this concoction, which was like nothing he’d ever experienced. It wasn’t as sweet or milky as he was used to. It was dark and strong, with enough sweetness to soothe the palate, and the tiniest bite of peppery spice to arouse the senses. He groaned with pleasure as he swallowed.

“By the gods, that’s incredible.”

“Huh?” She sounded thoroughly confused.

Philip didn’t answer. Instead, he reached out and clasped her wrist. As if stunned, she didn’t protest. He drew the hand—and the spoon she held—closer, until he could flick out his tongue

and taste the dark, gooey substance that drenched it.

The woman—this strange, beautiful, fiery woman—watched him raptly. As if she'd never seen a man take such pleasure in eating.

Philip enjoyed indulging his senses, and he wasn't sure which delighted him more right now—tasting the decadence gliding down his throat or watching the woman stare in fascination as he did so. “This is remarkable,” he said as he delicately licked off every drop. “Did you make it?”

“I'm melting it for a recipe. You... like to eat chocolate?”

“I like to eat *your* chocolate.”

She coughed into her fist, then yanked her hand away. Seeing the way her eyes had dropped to his mouth, and she'd pressed her other hand into her middle, as if she needed to grab on to something, he suspected he knew why.

“That was suggestive, wasn't it?” he asked, hearing the unintentional purr in his tone. Something about the eroticism of licking his favorite delicacy off a spoon held in the hand of a strange and seductive woman had sent warm waves of sexual pleasure through him. They'd obviously translated to her.

“Very.”

“Should I apologize?”

“Only if you're sincere.”

He didn't apologize. Because though he'd only been telling the truth about how much he enjoyed her tasty concoction, he couldn't deny that he liked the idea of tasting *her*, as well.

Silence descended. She was waiting for the words—sincere or not—but he didn't speak. As her breathing became more audible, the electric spark between them intensified, until it seemed like a tangible thing. It enveloped them, shifted back and forth between them, drawing him to her as if with magnetic force.

He knew things were different in this world. In some ways more free, in others more rigid. He also knew he had no right to take anything this woman hadn't freely offered, in any world.

She might not have said it aloud, but her eyes were offering. Her lips were offering. Her body was offering, considering the way she swayed toward him as if against her will.

So he took.

Without a word, he slid his hands into her thick hair, sending glossy strands tumbling, and dragged her to him for a deep, hungry, chocolate-flavored kiss.

HE WAS KISSING HER.

Claire registered that much, accepted the fact that a complete stranger—one who should be in the dictionary defining tall, dark and handsome—had his lips on hers and was, oh, God, plunging his warm, delicious tongue into her mouth.

Then reality left. Just walked out the door, taking a huge chunk of her common sense with it.

She responded. Heaven help her, everything else just faded away and she could focus only on the strength of his magnificent body pressed against hers, and the taste of his mouth.

Chocolate had always been her favorite flavor, but she had never realized that it was missing something, some vital, intrinsic ingredient. Not until now, when she finally got to taste decadent melted Godiva spiced with powerful, devouring man.

She dropped the spoon, hearing it clatter to the floor, as if from a very far distance. Lifting her hands, she put them on his shoulders, while a voice inside screamed at her to push him away. But those traitorous things at the ends of her arms clung to him instead, her fingers digging into the thick muscles as she held tight and kissed him back.

She liked kissing. She loved it, actually. And considering she'd been single for more than a year, she'd missed the intimacy. Especially because this... well, this went beyond anything she'd

ever experienced.

Their tongues twirled together, hot and hungry. Time and place fell away and there became nothing but this moment, this man, this kiss. They shared each breath, shared the same space as their bodies melded, her hands going around his neck, one of his dropping to the small of her back to pull her hard against his groin.

She gasped, feeling the rigid erection pressed against her. Part of her leaped for joy, wanting it—wanting that. But the smart, rational Claire, who'd been gagged and shoved in a mental closet for the last ninety seconds, finally came barreling out and screamed *Stop!*

“No,” she exclaimed, pulling her mouth away. Sanity required her to also take a full step back, ignoring the look of disappointment that appeared on his oh-so-handsome face. That not being far enough, she hopped back another step, colliding with the counter and wincing in pain.

“Are you all right?” he asked, his brow furrowed in concern as he reached for her.

“I’m fine.” She shoved his hand back and ducked away from him, darting around the counter to watch him from the relative safety of the other side.

Safety? Hell, three feet wasn’t a safe distance, not from a man this incredibly alluring.

And dangerous. Don’t forget dangerous. He’s a bad guy, remember? A thug sent here to rough up your kid brother!

Okay, so sometimes even she felt as if Freddy needed a slap upside the head. But no way was she going to let some dude crack his—er, no way would she let the Nutcracker do his thing.

It seemed not only impossible but actually criminal that someone this smooth and sexy should be a criminal. Villains were supposed to be brawny and beastly, like something out of a Disney cartoon, complete with broken noses, crooked or missing teeth, bulging foreheads and tree-trunk-size necks.

Uh-uh. Not this guy.

While he was very tall, with wide shoulders and a broad, rock-hard chest that she could almost still feel pressed against her sensitized body, he wasn't at all beefy or brawny. He instead looked and felt like the perfect man should. Powerful but lean, muscular but elegant, somehow. He moved almost gracefully, not a lumbering beast, more a prowling predator.

She'd definitely felt stalked as he'd moved close enough to... sample her chocolate.

But it wasn't just his body that had sucked her brain cells dry and let her kiss a complete stranger. There was also his face. Oh, Lord, that face. He was perfect, been sculpted from marble... His skin was a bit dark, as if he had just come from someplace sunny, or was of Mediterranean—Italian?—descent. The fineness of his brow was accentuated by the widow's peak that pierced it. His cheekbones were high and autocratic, his cheeks lean, his nose straight and proud, that jaw strong, with a delicious-looking cleft at the bottom. His thick hair was jet-black, short,

but wavy and incredibly finger-tempting. And his eyes—those almost intrusive, assessing, deep-set and heavily lashed eyes—were dark brown... like her favorite semisweet confections.

All that and a chocaholic. The man was simply divine.

Ding-ding-ding, hello in there? He wants to hurt your brother.

Remember?

She would never let him get close to Freddy. Claire had promised their mother on her deathbed that she would look out for her baby brother. Allowing him to be... de-testicled wouldn't just be neglecting her responsibilities, it would be unforgivable.

"Now should I offer my apologies?" the sexy stranger asked, his dark eyes gleaming in the soft glow of the overhead lights. Both amusement and awareness shone in those depths, also revealed by the slight uptilting of his soft, sensuous mouth.

I kissed that mouth? I was held by this man?

Impossible. Those kinds of wild, romantic moments happened to other women. To helpless, small, delicate, beautiful women. Not to blunt, responsible, down-to-earth Amazons like Claire Hoffman.

"Only if you're sincere," she mumbled, swallowing.

Considering her words were the volume of a mouse's squeak, she couldn't say there was much chance she'd get an apology.

"Let me rephrase that. Do I have anything to apologize for?"

Did he? He hadn't exactly forced her. Yeah, he'd started the kiss, but he hadn't grabbed her, pushed her up against the refrigerator and ripped her clothes off.

Oh, wow.

Stop, stop, stop!

Angry at her traitorous body, which demanded he do anything *but* apologize, she dodged the question altogether. “Look, I’m not letting you touch Freddy. Kissing me isn’t going to work any more than threatening me would have.”

He flinched, as if slapped, and for the first time since he’d entered the kitchen, he looked angry. “Threatening you? I would never threaten a woman.”

How noble. Hence the name? No nuts, no worries? “So you save your threats for young, inexperienced fools like my brother?”

“Your brother?” That fine brow went up and he tilted his handsome head in confusion. “Mr. Hoffman?”

“Yes. Freddy’s my brother. And if you think I’m going to let you hurt him, you’ve got another think coming.”

“Shouldn’t that be another *thought* coming?”

She growled. “What are you, the freaking grammar police?”

“I’m not from this area, and I am not sure I understand all your colloquialisms.”

“Where do you come from?” she asked, though she cursed herself for doing so. She had no interest in the man, and this conversation was beyond confusing.

“The land of Barcelona,” he declared with a decisive nod.

“Uh... Spain? You sure don’t sound Spanish.”

He waved a hand. “I am well traveled... but, um, but also poor.

A student making my way around the world.”

Huh. That was surprising. The guy oozed confidence and self-reliance, looking more like a ship’s captain or a... a sheik—that was it, some oil-rich gazillionaire. Yes, his clothes were casual, and didn’t appear terribly expensive, but he wore them like somebody who had money.

He had the leanest waist and hips, most attractive male butt and strong legs... at least, as far as she could tell. And considering she’d been pressed up against him five minutes ago, she could tell a lot. So, really, anything would look phenomenal on the man.

Or off the man.

She swallowed hard, trying to focus. “So tell me, *student*, what are you learning from your boss, the bookie? How to swindle people? How to... crack nuts?”

“You keep talking about this nut cracking. I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

There was no disguising the confusion in his voice. For the first time, a hint of uncertainty entered Claire’s mind.

She’d turned around and found a big, strong, dark and mysterious stranger in the shop kitchen, asking for Freddy. Her mind had immediately connected him with the deadly man her brother had warned her about a few days ago.

But what if he wasn’t who she thought he was? What if she’d mistaken him for a mobster, when he was just... Just what? Looking for directions to the Statue of Liberty by slipping in the back door of a closed candy shop on a Sunday evening?

Something didn't add up. But she had to know for sure.

"Who, exactly, are you?"

"I'm Philip." He extended his hand. "Philip... Smith."

She eyed it as if it were poisonous. Not because she didn't want to touch him, to feel his hand in hers and assess its strength, and imagine how it might feel rubbing against parts of her body. But rather, because she did.

Finally, though, realizing he wasn't going to drop his arm until she shook, she reached out and grasped his fingers with hers, squeezing lightly, pumping once and yanking away.

No matter how quickly she moved, it wasn't fast enough. She was still left with curiosity about other squeezing and pumping. Lots of squeezing and pumping.

Pull your head out of his pants. It had obviously been too long since she'd gotten laid if she was thinking about sex with a guy who might or might not be here to neuter her brother.

The stranger was watching her closely, his eyebrows raised expectantly, and she finally remembered he'd offered her his name.

"I'm Claire Hoffman," she mumbled.

"Claire. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance."

Was he for real? Would a mob enforcer really talk like that?

"And if you run the delightful shop, in which I purchased some festive holiday candies yesterday, it appears I am your upstairs neighbor."

"Wha-a-a...?"

Good thing she was leaning against the counter, not only because her legs suddenly felt weak, but because there would be something to catch her plummeting jaw as it collapsed downward. She stared at the man, putting the pieces together, remembering how Freddy had cajoled her to rent the upstairs apartments to get him his gambling money. They hadn't talked about it since; she'd been busy decorating the shop and restocking specific seasonal goodies. Could he—would he—have done it behind her back? Would even weak, spoiled Freddy do something so rotten?

You didn't. Oh, God, tell me you didn't.

But she knew he had. Freddy had already had this plan in mind, or perhaps even in motion, when he'd come to her about the money the other day. Then when he'd asked her to meet him at his place to talk some more yesterday, he'd stood her up. She'd had to get her part-timer to cover the store on a busy Saturday afternoon, and Freddy hadn't even been there.

Because he was here, renting those apartments?

Oh, that sneaky bastard.

"Now tell me," Philip ordered, "who did you think I was when I first came in? And why did the thought of that person being here frighten you?"

"I wasn't frightened."

"I think you were," he said, those dark eyes piercing, demanding she reveal the truth.

"I thought it might be somebody looking for my brother."

“Someone who wanted to hurt your brother?” The man’s tone said he wouldn’t accept anything less than pure honesty. “Someone who’d threatened him?”

“Maybe.”

Her visitor’s jaw clenched; she could see the flexing of his muscles.

“Would this person hurt *you* to get at your brother?”

She shifted her gaze, not knowing what Freddy’s cohorts were capable of.

Philip’s whole body seemed to grow bigger, harder—more threatening—as he leaned closer. “I walked right in. Why are you working here alone at night? Your brother should be here protecting you!”

Laughter burst from her mouth at the very idea. “Freddy couldn’t protect his graham crackers from the other kids in day care.”

“He doesn’t sound like much of a man.”

“He’s only twenty-one,” she said, not even sure why she was making excuses for her sibling. “And I’ve sort of had to finish raising him since our mother died.”

Or, well, all his life. But who was counting?

“At twenty-one you’re a man,” Philip insisted, “in any land. It’s wrong that he put you in such a position.” Her visitor cast a quick, malevolent glance toward the door. “Don’t worry, if this dangerous person comes looking for him now, I’ll take care of it. You don’t have to worry anymore. You’re no longer alone.”

Right. No longer alone. Because he freaking lived upstairs! How she'd let herself be distracted from that, she had no idea.

Then she realized it was probably because it had been such a long time since anyone had acted protectively toward her. Maybe it was a little overbearing, and maybe he did sound like a caveman, but something about the idea of this hot, sexy man wanting to protect her seemed incredibly exciting.

But he wouldn't be around to make good. He couldn't possibly. Because there was no way she could let him stay. He was going to have to leave her life just as quickly as he'd come into it.

Why that thought sent a sharp stab of regret rushing through her, she couldn't say. It made no sense; she barely knew him. But there was no other choice.

Swallowing and taking a deep breath, she spoke, "You know what? I think we have some talking to do. So how about you sit down and we figure out exactly what's going on here."

Except she knew what was going on.

She'd been scammed by her own brother. And now she had to figure out how to get rid of her unwanted upstairs neighbor.

THOUGH IT TOOK SOME cursing, mumbling, hair twisting and chocolate eating—everything other than the chocolate part coming from *her*, the beautiful woman he still tasted on his lips—Philip had finally figured out what had happened. Claire Hoffman owned the building in which he sat. She had not authorized her wastrel brother to rent out any of the upstairs units, and was both furious and fearful. Furious at the position

her sibling had put her in, and fearful of how Philip would react to her attempts to back out of the deal.

Well, that wasn't going to happen. Her brother might not have had the legal right to offer Philip and his entourage the dwellings, but he had accepted money for them and scrawled a signature on a contract, one his sister carefully examined when Philip withdrew it from his pocket. And while he might not be accustomed to all the ways of this world, he knew a few things, including a bit about the law.

She could make him leave. But he could then go to the authorities and charge her brother with fraud or theft.

The way she stumbled over her words and wouldn't meet Philip's eye said she knew it. But she wasn't ready to give up.

"So you see," she said, twisting her hands in front of her on the broad counter, "I couldn't possibly let you and your two friends stay in those apartments. They're really not in any condition to be lived in."

"They are acceptable to me."

"You don't understand. I *can't* let you stay."

Maybe not. Maybe, in fact, Philip didn't really need to stay. He could certainly afford to find another place to live. It might not be quite as perfect for his plan to pose as a poor man, while also being able to stay in the heart of the most exciting city in this world, but it could be done.

He wasn't going to do it, however.

Because of her.

First, because there was no way on Elatyria he was leaving this woman alone to deal with the dangerous criminal she'd thought him to be. He suspected her brother owed someone money and would use the cash Philip had given him to pay off the debt. But what if he hadn't? What if he'd pocketed it and left the city, leaving his sister to deal with his mess—and his creditors?

Oh, no. Philip wasn't leaving her unprotected, not by any means, whether she liked it or not. If he, Shelby and Teeny had to take shifts guarding the door to her shop—or the one that led to her apartment—that's what they'd do.

Aside from wishing to protect her, he simply wanted to know more about this woman, Claire Hoffman, who was calling to him, drawing him like no one ever had. Perhaps it was because she was talking in circles, telling tales of terror—as if a few bugs or sagging floors mattered—to make him leave. Perhaps because of the way she'd tasted and felt in his arms. Perhaps because she was trying so desperately to pretend she hadn't been every bit as affected by that warm, hungry kiss as he had.

Whatever the reason, he had found her, he'd kissed her, and he still wanted her. So he wasn't going anywhere.

"I'm afraid I can't simply move back out," he told her when she stopped for breath. "Unless, of course, you can return all of the money I gave your brother." He was certain she couldn't.

She nibbled her lip. "Uh, how much was that, exactly?"

"Fifteen thousand American dollars."

She coughed so hard she fell off her stool. Fortunately, Philip

had quick reflexes and dived off his own to grab her before she could hit the floor. He landed on his knees, catching her in his arms and yanking her protectively against his body.

Raspy breaths escaped her mouth and she looked at him, blinking rapidly. He could feel the wild thudding of her heart against his chest, and wondered whether she was alarmed by her near miss... or by his nearness.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“You are most welcome.”

They stayed that way for a moment, staring at each other, and Philip tried very hard to count the number of blue flecks in her green eyes—or green flecks in her blue ones—before finally remembering he should probably let her up.

Moving slowly, carefully, to make sure she didn't slip—either to the floor, or closer against any of his body parts that were reacting mightily to having her in his arms again—he gently set her down, then rose to his feet and pulled her up, as well.

“I take it that's more than you can pay back?” he murmured.

“Definitely more.” She swallowed visibly. “He actually charged you fifteen thousand dollars for those apartments?”

“Yes, five thousand per month for each unit, plus another five as a security deposit.”

She shook her head. “Yeah, sure. Because there's so much valuable stuff that could be damaged or broken.”

Sarcasm was common in his world, too, but he quite liked how she did it.

“Fifteen thousand dollars,” she repeated to herself.

“That was almost all the money I had. The, uh, the people in my village back home took up a collection to send me here,” he said quickly, realizing this was quite a lot of money.

She scrunched her brow. “Isn’t Barcelona a big city?”

A misfire. Damnation, he should have studied his back-story more. Aware that the best way to avoid answering an uncomfortable question was to shrug it off, he shrugged. “It is therefore more than I can afford to lose,” he told her, which wasn’t exactly true, but wasn’t totally a lie.

The amount was nothing overall, but in terms of his presence here in New York, it was important. He had brought only a certain amount of cash from the vault at home—his father always keeping a supply of various currencies on hand for traveling expenses—and had to make it last. Philip couldn’t start all over with another housing situation without coming perilously close to the limit of his funds. That would leave him having to sell something—possibly one of Shelby’s bejeweled rings, which Philip would of course replace. But it would hardly be worth the man’s whining.

“I can’t afford that,” she said, sounding on the verge of tears.

He hated that her brother had done this to her, and thought for a moment of telling her he’d reconsidered and would leave. The money truly meant nothing to him.

But she might. And he simply couldn’t walk away without knowing for sure.

“You don’t have to,” he told her, reaching out and taking her hand in his. A strong hand, but still soft, pretty.

She tensed for a moment, staring at their fingers twined together on the counter, then relaxed.

“So it is settled,” he said, sure she’d begun to accept the inevitability of it. “We will stay.”

“You can’t seriously want to.”

“Of course we want to.”

“The place is a dump!”

“A...”

“It’s a wreck. A mess. A ruin.”

“I am aware it’s not in the best condition. It needs a bit of work, but I’m sure my... friends and I can make do.”

“You almost sound as if you *like* the idea of having to stay here.”

“I do.”

“Why? I mean, there are better locations, and definitely better buildings.”

He couldn’t tell her the truth, couldn’t possibly admit that he was staying because of her. Because she was in danger. Because she’d fought him and confronted him and disliked him—and yet still kissed him as if she needed his breath to survive. Because she was, right now, rubbing the soft pad of her thumb against his, sending frissons of sensation through him as he imagined all the other ways, other places, he wanted her touch.

So he settled for replying, “It’s where I need to be, and you

can't pay me back, so I'm making the best of it."

She blinked rapidly, nibbled her lip and pulled her hand away to clench it with her other one. Finally, as if not quite believing she was saying it, she agreed.

"All right, then. If you're completely sure, I guess you've got yourself a place to live for the month. But just until the New Year."

Actually, he didn't have quite that much time. He'd lost days in travel, and would on the way home, too. So he had only a little over three weeks before he'd have to start heading back to Elatyria. Less than one month of freedom before his responsibilities would take over his life.

Not much time to find the woman of his dreams, one he could love for the rest of his days.

Or, in case he'd already found her, not much time to make her fall in love with him in return.

3

ALTHOUGH PHILIP WAS certain Claire was the only woman he wanted to get to know, his two compatriots insisted he follow his original plan to meet as many as possible before pursuing anyone. He'd had to keep an open mind and at least allow the possibility that he'd meet someone else who interested him more.

So, despite wanting to do nothing but find reasons to bump into the lady, which he did a few times—or better yet, find reasons to kiss her again—he had to leave the apartment and get out and about in New York. He visited museums, rode the subway, consumed horrible coffee in dingy cafés and excellent Scotch in swanky restaurants. He was flirted with, propositioned, and even argued over by two women at a club—yet his heart didn't so much as skip a beat for any other female he set eyes on. Only *her*.

Whenever he wasn't out fulfilling his obligations to his kingdom and his family, he was at the apartment, fulfilling his vow to protect Claire. She didn't know the Elatyrians were on guard. It seemed American women were touchy about being protected by a man.

Philip kept watch from the stairs, or the back alley, or from across the street. Shelby had complained incessantly, especially about the cold, but Teeny was happy to help, since being a

bodyguard was his job and his favorite thing to do. He would love for something to happen so he could crush someone, and Philip had had to physically drag him away from a taxi driver who'd paused in front of Claire's shop for too long.

After a few days, Philip began to relax his guard, feeling fairly confident they hadn't overlooked any scurrilous characters lurking around, and he released his friends from their duty. But he didn't release himself. He kept watching, not only because it was still possible she could be in danger, but because he'd rather stay here, getting to know her moment by stolen moment, than exchange a word with anyone else.

Guarding her had given him the chance to see her in so many guises. Claire was always smiling and friendly toward her customers, patient with her annoyingly perky clerk. She looked happy when hanging colorful holiday decorations in the window, and he'd heard her humming Christmas tunes when closing up at night. She always bent down to eye level when a child entered the shop and usually slipped the little ones a free chocolate if their parents approved.

Every morning, after the early rush and before the lunch-hour one, she would sit at the same small table in the front window. She'd slowly sip a cup of coffee, staring out at the world with a dreamy expression on her face, as if for those few minutes she was allowing herself to let go of her responsibilities and thinking only lovely thoughts.

He liked those moments especially. Claire looked young and

fragile and almost carefree, when usually she was so strong and hardworking. But always beautiful.

Sometimes, though, she looked utterly weary. Like right now.

Philip stood at the top of the staircase, watching from the shadows. Though not on constant vigil, he did like to keep an eye out after she closed up, wanting to be there when she made the short walk down the darkened hall from her store to her small apartment. Since she usually kept the back door to the building unlocked during the day for deliveries, he was always tense about these transition times and wanted to make sure she got there safely.

Tonight, she looked exhausted, having worked a long, ten-hour shift by herself. Her eyes were shadowed, her face pale. She hadn't even finished locking the shop door behind her before she was reaching up to tug at the clips in her bun, letting the thick mass of dark hair tumble down over her shoulders. It fell in a sea of curls to midway down her back, luscious and inviting, like the richest chocolate she sold.

Philip made a small sound of approval, not even realizing he'd done it until she jerked her head and peered up into the shadows, her eyes wide, a little frightened.

"Pardon me, I didn't mean to startle you," he said, walking down the stairs toward her.

"Oh, it's you," she replied, her voice holding a tremor. He wondered if she'd had a few sleepless nights, waiting for her brother's unsavory friends to pay a visit. "What are you doing?"

Philip lifted a bag of rubbish that he'd brought along in case they bumped into one another. "Just taking this out."

"Okay." She lifted a hand, self-consciously smoothing her hair, as if uncomfortable about having taken it down.

"It's beautiful," he told her sincerely, though he wished the hallway wasn't so shadowy, so he could see all the variations of color. What he'd originally thought was simply a dark, rich brown appeared to have lighter streaks, but he couldn't be sure. "Keeping it up and hidden away is criminal."

There was a brief hesitation while she stared at him, as if unsure how to respond. He sensed she was unused to compliments. Which told him men here were not only blind but stupid.

Finally, she chuckled softly. "Tell that to a customer who finds a long strand of hair in his candy. Eww."

Philip conceded the point. "When you are not working, then." Reaching out, he smoothed an errant strand, fingering its softness, then tucked it behind her ear.

She sucked in a breath. Philip dropped his hand. The air in the cramped hallway seemed to grow hotter by the second as awareness and tension flowed between them.

He knew what attraction felt like, knew the lure of sexual heat, and right now it was building like a huge, tangible presence between them.

"So, are you settling in okay? I've heard you guys moving around a lot, but haven't seen much of you over the past few days.

I've never even met your friends."

Her voice held the tiniest hint of wistfulness. A less confident man might not have heard it, or might have misinterpreted, but Philip recognized it.

He mentally kicked himself. After the kiss they'd shared, she had to have been wondering if he had romantic intentions toward her. In fulfilling his obligations—continuing his bride hunt—for the past four days, he'd ignored the one woman he actually wanted.

Well, that was something he intended to remedy. Very soon.

"We're fine," he assured her. "We've just been getting our living quarters established. There is a lot to do."

She sighed and ran a hand through her thick hair. "I know. I'm sorry. I should have come up and offered to clean—"

"Don't be ridiculous. You're not a maidservant."

"No, but I could have at least made sure there were no dead bugs all over the floor."

"There aren't." A tiny grin lifted the corners of his mouth. "Anymore."

"Gross," she said with a reluctant laugh. "I suck at this landlady thing."

"As I recall, it wasn't a job you chose."

"True."

"Speaking of which, have you heard from your brother?"

Her lips tightened. "Not a single word."

Not surprising. The cheerful young man hadn't looked like the

type who would enjoy being confronted by anyone, especially an angry sister. “I’m sure he’s all right.”

She growled. “He won’t be after I feed him a batch of fudge with a laxative icing.”

Philip didn’t know exactly what she meant, but got the feeling it didn’t bode well for Freddy. “Poisoning your sibling isn’t very nice,” he said, while privately conceding her brother likely deserved it.

“He won’t die,” she insisted.

He laughed softly. “Bloodthirsty, are you? I didn’t think you capable of murder, Claire.”

“You should have seen me after you left Sunday night.”

He had seen her. Every time he closed his eyes.

She leaned against the hallway wall. “So, have you gotten out at all to see New York?”

“A bit.”

He told her of his adventures with the subway, hearing her chuckle as he admitted he’d ridden the thing for four hours straight one day, being unsure where to get off. She gave him a few tips, talked about her own favorite things to do in the city... and gave him an idea for his next move.

Now wasn’t a good time. She looked exhausted, having worked alone all day. Plus he had some plans to make. But very soon, he would, as they said here, take his best shot.

“I should let you get inside,” he told her when he saw her struggling to hide a yawn. “You look most weary.”

“You can say that again. Making ten dozen truffles really shouldn’t be such backbreaking work.”

The days to come would be better; she wouldn’t have to work so hard. He’d make sure of it, even if he had to send Shelby to sell sweets in the store and set Teeny to baking in the kitchen, so Claire was able to take a break now and then. Picturing such a thing, he smiled.

“What?”

“I’m just imagining my... friend Teeny working in your kitchen, making delicate chocolates. ’Tis not a pretty picture.”

“Bull-in-the-china-shop sort?”

“More like a mastodon.”

She chuckled, as if visualizing it. “I’m afraid I can’t give him a job right now, anyway. I can barely make payroll for my salesclerk, who I can afford only four days a week.”

Hmm. How much, he wondered, would a kitchen assistant require? And could the salesclerk be persuaded to work a few more hours for money slipped to her on the side?

“Well, I should go in,” Claire said.

“Yes, of course. Good night,” he told her, resisting the urge to touch her again.

But he would, very soon. He just had a few things to work out. In the meantime, he would get to know her, be someone she could rely on. He would befriend her, with courtesy and politeness. And see what happened.

“Good night, Philip.”

Her smile was gentle, sweet, and his heart clenched as she nodded and walked to her door. After she unlocked it and let herself inside, he listened for the click of the bolt. Once he was sure she was safely locked in, he made his way back upstairs, but didn't go into his cold, lonely apartment just yet. Instead, he stood on the landing for several long minutes, thinking about that smile, that laugh, that naughty gleam in her eye. Thinking about that hair. About sinking his hands into it and feeling it brush against his bare skin... his chest, his throat, his stomach.

That was when he acknowledged that he'd wasted enough time looking for someone else. The only woman he wanted lived right downstairs from him. He could walk around for days, find ways to be introduced to a hundred more single woman and still not be drawn to anyone the way he was to Claire Hoffman.

And so as soon as he could arrange it, his courtship of her would begin in earnest.

CLAIRE HAD BEEN TELLING herself for several days that she didn't mind that her handsome tenant hadn't sought her out in private after that first night. Yes, he'd kissed her. Yes, he'd rocked her world in the process. Yes, he'd left her dazed, confused and dreaming fantastic dreams every night since. But he hadn't promised anything.

Maybe in Spain, deep tongue kisses meant "Nice to meet you."

After she'd finally had another conversation with him, outside her apartment Thursday night, however, she was forced to admit

the truth to herself. She'd been bothered that he hadn't pursued her. Seriously bothered. She was attracted to the man in a way she'd never been attracted to anyone. She just didn't know what she was going to do about it.

As ridiculous as it seemed, she tried to intentionally run into him again throughout the next few days. She lingered in the hallway during her breaks. She hovered at the bottom of the stairs, or at the entrance to the building a few times. She certainly heard noises from upstairs, or sometimes from the hallway, when they were hauling in furniture that looked like it had come from the dump or the junk store.

And her plan worked; she did see him and talk to him. But never with the intimacy of the night they'd met, or the time he'd been taking out the trash. Now when they bumped into each other Philip was polite and courteous, insisting on opening doors for her, and once helping her move a stack of boxes to the stockroom. She tried not to notice the way his shirt pulled tight against his arms and shoulders when he moved. But that would be like trying not to notice a tsunami roaring up the Hudson.

Beyond that, though, they'd been nothing but cordial. Like real neighbors. Mr. Tall, Dark and Sexy was the perfect tenant—which was a good thing, right?

Wrong. Because she felt she was missing out on something every time he was cordial, when she wanted him to be flirtatious. Every time he held the door, when she wanted him to hold *her*.

Now, she probably wouldn't even have that much. Christmas

was exactly two weeks away, and she would be incredibly busy with the store. Though, she conceded, not as busy as she'd feared. To her surprise—and delight—an older lady who'd once owned a candy shop and was looking for something to do now that she'd been widowed, had come in looking for a job on Saturday, and had gone right to work. Mrs. West had insisted on working for a low salary to “get back in the game” as she called it, and had quickly become indispensable. Not only was she wonderful in the kitchen, she had a sharp mind for business and had made several great suggestions.

What a godsend. And not only that, Jean, her part-time salesperson, had said she needed a few more hours, and had agreed to let Claire pay her every two weeks instead of weekly so it would be easier for her to make payroll. Businesswise, things were going well.

Personally? Not so much.

It wasn't just Philip. Claire also hadn't seen or spoken with her idiot, soon-to-be-seriously-smacked-if-she-had-anything-to-say-about-it brother. Freddy hadn't been coming around, nor had he returned any of her dozen messages. Probably because he knew she would, A) want to do violence on his person; and B) demand that he give her the five thousand dollars he'd scammed off Philip so she could pay back the man's security deposit when he moved out.

She had no idea how she was going to do that, and found herself half hoping they'd decide to stay another month so she

could tell him he didn't have to pay, that she'd take the rent out of the deposit. Then she could write it off and call it even. Even if they stayed, that wouldn't allow her to recoup the money she'd had to pay to get the utilities turned on upstairs, but it was better than trying to come up with five "large."

That, she promised herself, was the *only* reason she wanted Philip Smith to stick around. It had nothing to do with his looks or his smooth voice, his sexy smile, or, oh, God, that incredible kiss.

"Are you okay?" asked Jeannie, who, like Claire, had been working like a madwoman during the late afternoon rush on Tuesday. Word was spreading about I Want Candy and people were constantly calling or coming in to place orders for specialized holiday gifts. Claire had gone through so much red and green icing, she wished she owned stock in Dixie Kane sugar. "You're so quiet."

"I'm fine, just thinking," Claire admitted. "I've barely had time to do that lately."

She'd looked at the clock during a lull that afternoon, and then three hours had passed in a blur of customers and phone calls. It was nearly six now, almost closing time and already dark out, if Midtown Manhattan could ever be called dark. Especially at this time of year, with all the twinkling lights and holiday decorations brightening even the gloomiest of nights.

"Hey, I finally met one of the new guys."

"New guys?"

“One of the dudes from upstairs. Talk about a hottie.”

Claire immediately turned and busied herself filing some cleared order forms. “Oh?”

“He’s very gentlemanly, too. Treated me like I was all highbrow and stuff.”

Jeannie cracked her gum. *So highbrow.*

Claire had already talked to her about that habit, among others, but the young woman, while a hard worker, and smart, sometimes seemed to have the attention span of a three-year-old on Pixy Stix. Which was a good thing when it came to her energy level and enthusiasm, but a bad one about stuff like follow-through.

“Yes, I suppose.”

“Is he single?” Jeannie asked.

Claire’s hand tightened on the top receipt and she found herself crumpling it, then forced her fingers to relax. “I have no idea.”

If not, he’s got some explaining to do about that kiss.

“I mean, I assume he is, since it’s just guys up there. Unless they’re... You don’t think they’re gay, do you?”

She barked a laugh. “Definitely not.”

“Yeah, didn’t think so. He’s supergentlemanly and all, but he didn’t set off my gaydar.”

What a joke. The man’s testosterone had testosterone. He was utterly male, masculine, confidently sexual, sensual and dangerous as hell to any woman who was the least bit susceptible

to dark, mysterious strangers.

Which Claire wasn't. Right?

"Oh, wow, there he is now," Jeannie said, pointing toward the front of the shop.

Her heart lurching, Claire glanced at the door and saw a dark-haired man entering. But it wasn't the one who made her pulse race and her underwear dampen.

"Hey, handsome," said Jeannie with a simper.

"Good evening," the stranger replied, his voice slightly accented, as Philip's was. He was also similarly featured, and good-looking, but something about the way his chin and nose were held higher than absolutely necessary told Claire he wasn't much like the man she'd met in her kitchen.

Still, better this man—who didn't confuse and attract her—than his friend—who did.

Claire had just breathed a sigh of relief that she wasn't going to come face-to-face with the guy she couldn't stop thinking about when the door swung open again, sending in a blast of cold air and hot man.

Oh, boy, here we go.

It was him. Big, strong, so unbelievably handsome, his hair windswept, his mouth curved in a smile that could stop traffic.

Panty-dampening time. Damn it all.

She turned and began shoveling chocolates molded into wreath, bell and Santa shapes from one tray to another. Then she put them back. Busy hands made a clean mind, or something like

that. Actually, all her busy hands made was smeary chocolate.

“Hello, Claire,” he said, his voice smooth, silky. Close.

She spun around, to find him standing directly in front of her on the other side of the counter. “Uh, hi. How’s it going?”

“How is what going?”

She took a deep breath and tried again, wondering why this guy so easily flustered her. She’d never had trouble talking to a man before, but Philip left her unsure of herself and a little dizzy.

“How are you doing? Is everything all right upstairs?”

He nodded once. “All is well. Quite comfortable, though I did have to bring someone in to fix the heating apparatus.”

Oh, great. Something else she owed him for.

“Shelby is most happy that it is working now.”

“How could anyone survive this climate without it?” called Philip’s companion—Shelby?—obviously overhearing. Then he went back to flirting with Jeannie, whose attention appeared to have drifted from her original hottie to the inferno who was now speaking to Claire. She was staring back and forth between them like a kid in a... well, whatever.

“Sorry about that,” Claire said. “If you give me the receipt for the service call, I’ll pay you back.”

“No need, it was quite inexpensive. And I wasn’t truly bothered by the cold, though we do come from a warm climate,” Philip said, that purr in his voice making her think of all kinds of warm, sweaty things.

“Oh. Well, I can see how that would be different. It does get

pretty cold here,” she mumbled.

Reduced to talking about the weather? Was this really the best she could do? Her late mother, once a noted femme fatale, would be rolling over in her grave.

Her mom had given up on Claire having any grace or feminine wiles by the time she was ten and hit five-eight. Claire had been all lanky build, clumsy feet, gangly arms and legs. Nothing like her petite, delicate mother, the ballerina, who'd been adored by men all over the country once upon a time. That was when Claire had finally been allowed to quit ballet lessons—which she'd loathed. She'd then focused on the one thing she'd loved to do since she'd been old enough to beg her grandmother to let her help in the kitchen: bake.

“And you? You are well?” her tenant asked.

“I'm fine.”

“There have been no... incidents?”

“Incidents?”

“No strangers bothering you?”

Realizing what he was talking about, she shook her head. “No. I don't think there's anything to worry about anymore.”

“Not even this Mr. Nutcracker?”

Claire chuckled under her breath as she remembered she'd thought this man could be a thug. She replied, “He's not going to be a problem. Your rent money took care of that issue.”

“As long as your brother paid off the people he owed.”

Her jaw dropped.

“It truly wasn’t difficult to figure out what had happened, and why he would have rented your property without your permission,” Philip said, touching his index finger to her chin and pushing her mouth closed.

Claire swallowed hard, affected by that simple contact far more than she should have been. Shaking off the reaction—Mexican jumping beans in her stomach—she spoke: “He made a mistake. He’s young and stupid.”

“That much younger than you?”

No, not really. Only five years. But in terms of maturity? She and Freddy had been worlds apart. Claire had had to grow up quickly the first time she’d found their mother passed out from having taken too many pain pills. She’d called 911, then had to go alone to drag her father home from a nearby bar to tell him about it.

She’d been eleven.

“Maybe not in terms of years.”

“The real question is, did your brother use the money to pay back his creditors?”

“I’m sure he did.”

“Positive?”

“Of course.” Oh, she wished her voice held more conviction. Clearing her throat, she added, “Why wouldn’t he?”

“Maybe he wanted to use it to go away, escape his problems?”

She gulped. She hadn’t heard from Freddy, but assumed it was because he was too much of a chickenshit to face her. Not that

he'd... He wouldn't have... Oh, God, would he?

"Sorry." Philip sounded sincere. "You hadn't thought of that."

"No, I hadn't."

"You haven't spoken to him?"

"Not a word."

"Then I'll just continue keeping watch."

"Keeping a... You're watching me?"

"Watching over you," he grudgingly admitted.

"*What?* I'm not some kid who needs protecting."

"Yet protect you I will," he replied, his tone silky, brooking no argument, the words an utter promise. He wasn't asking her, he was telling her. The man was going to look out for her whether she liked it or not.

She was left speechless, simply did not know how to respond to that. Most men she knew barely remembered to hold a door open for a woman, and this one wanted to be her bodyguard because somebody *might* come around looking to collect her brother's debt?

Her independent, free-minded, chicks-rule-and-guys-drool side wanted to tell him to take his protection and his alpha male bullshit and shove them.

But another part of her, maybe the part that went to bed every night thinking of the way this man had held her, kissed her, caught her when she'd nearly fallen on the floor, went all gooey and warm instead.

This would never do. Gooey and warm didn't fit her

personality or her life. She was tough and strong. She needed to focus on making her business succeed, on paying her bills, on keeping her brother on the straight-and-narrow.

Claire was the caretaker; she always had been. She wasn't a weeping heroine, a fair maiden who had heroes wanting to look after her. She had no time for overprotective men or fantasies of Prince Charming.

But oh, did he make it tempting.

She cleared her throat and slapped a hand down on the glass countertop. "Is there something you want?"

Me, for instance?

His dark eyes glittered to near black, his mind probably going right where hers had the moment she'd said the words. She kicked herself for giving him that kind of opening.

At least you didn't ask him if he liked your chocolate.

"Yes. There is," he told her.

She stepped back, pulled open the back door of the display case and bent toward it, waiting for him to point something out.

He didn't. He just stood there, looking down at her.

"Do you want to sample something before you decide? I can offer you a free taste."

Seriously? Again? Just tear open your sweater and offer a nipple. That would be about as subtle.

Claire had no idea why the man turned her into an idiot, but had to assume it was because she just hadn't figured him out yet. Or because he kissed like he'd freaking invented kissing.

His lips twitched, as if he'd read her mind and knew she was mad at herself for offering these so-not-subtle innuendos.

"As much as I'd love to *taste* anything you might offer, I actually came here for another reason."

Feeling heat burning her cheeks, she straightened and slid the case closed with a snap. "Oh?"

He nodded. "We've finished moving in, and I find I need to look around the city, to make sure I do want to attend the university here."

"Which one?"

He hesitated. "The New York one."

"New York University—NYU—is a great school." The guy seemed too old for an undergrad, so she assumed he was going for a postgraduate degree. "How can I help?"

"Come out with me and teach me all there is to know about your city."

Her heart thudded. He wasn't here asking for directions, or to buy something to satisfy a sweet tooth. "You want me to..."

"Yes, Claire. I want you to go out with me. Tonight. Now."

She blinked, wondering if that was an invitation, a request or a command. It sounded like all three.

Surprisingly, she hadn't immediately said no. In fact, a hearty *yes* had tried to leap to her lips, but she'd swallowed the word, knowing she shouldn't get any more involved with this man.

"I've got to close the shop."

"It's past closing time," he pointed out.

So it was. She hadn't even noticed. Nor, it appeared, had Jeannie, who was busy chatting up Philip's buddy, who sat at a small café table, his hands curled around a cup of hot coffee.

"I have work to do in the kitchen, orders for tomorrow."

"How long will that take?"

She thought about it. Mrs. West had been working this afternoon and had taken care of the basics. But there were some specialty jobs she didn't trust to anybody but herself. "Probably a couple of hours."

"Very well. Shall we say half past eight?"

A little over two hours from now. Yes, she supposed that was possible. She also supposed it was possible she could get up extra early tomorrow and do the orders. Which would leave her time now to shower, shave her legs, fix her hair, do her makeup, find something fabulous to wear, and talk herself into actually going through with it.

Oh, hell, who was she kidding? Her inner voice—the part of her that didn't always want to be careful and responsible and protective—had already decided.

For once, she wasn't going to be the sensible, always-thinking-of-everyone-else Claire. She was going to think of herself, to do something she *wanted* to do for a change, rather than what she was supposed to do.

She was going to go out with Mr. Dark and Dangerous.

“ARE YOU SURE SHE’S the one?” asked Shelby a short time later, while Philip got ready. “She’s so tall, and unfeminine.”

Philip pierced his cousin with a hot glare. “Her strength is part of what makes her so lovely, and she’s incredibly feminine in every way that really matters.”

He’d known plenty of ultrafeminine—read: helpless—females. Princesses, duchesses, rich merchants’ daughters... in his world, they were very much the same. All waited for a man to take care of them. None would risk breaking a nail to fix her own meal, much less spend hours on her feet preparing sweet and pretty treats that customers oohed and aahed over as they left the shop.

Claire’s independence fascinated him. Her beauty attracted him. Her wit amused him, her work ethic impressed him and her intelligence challenged him. She filled his thoughts, day and night. Oh, yes. He was sure she was the one.

“All right, then,” his cousin said with an exaggerated sigh, throwing himself down on the sagging couch. “It’s *your* funeral.” Shelby and Teeny made for interesting roommates—he could sometimes hear them bickering through the walls.

Philip just smiled to himself.

At eight-thirty, he walked downstairs to Claire’s apartment. The hallway was much brighter than it had been. He’d had Teeny

purchase lightbulbs, and had personally installed them, not liking her having to move through the shadows.

Philip knocked once, waited, and knocked again. Then he heard a voice calling along the hall.

“Sorry, I’m here. I wanted to finish up a few things.”

Claire was waving to him from the doorway to the sweet shop. He walked toward her, noting the changes in her appearance from when he’d left her a few hours ago.

Though her hair was held back by a clip at one side, she’d left it down, and his hands reflexively tightened at his sides. In the low lighting the other night, he hadn’t noticed the hints of copper in the sea of brown curls. The rich swirl of colors brought to mind the decadent caramel chocolates she sold in her shop, and he immediately decided that was his favorite color.

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