

MILLS & BOON



Vintage *SUPER ROMANCE*

The Spirit of Christmas

LIZ TALLEY

Liz Talley

The Spirit of Christmas

«HarperCollins»

Talley L.

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Brennan Henry doesn't have time for holly and jolly. He's been too busy boosting the bottom line for the family business. That is, until his eccentric grandfather hands over a lot of money to a stranger on the street. Some nonsense about her being the true spirit of Christmas. Yeah, right. All Brennan can see is he's now got a situation on his hands with one Mary Paige Gentry. Then he meets Mary Paige. And no matter how deep he searches, it seems she's the real deal. Kind, compassionate and just enough sass to keep him very intrigued. The spark of attraction between them could land him on the naughty list! But his is still a dollars-and-cents world...unless she can prove there's more to the season—more to life—than money.

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From Southern Scrooge to holiday hero?

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Then he meets Mary Paige. And no matter how deep he searches, it seems she's the real deal. Kind, compassionate and just enough sass to keep him very intrigued. The spark of attraction between them could land him on the naughty list! But his is still a dollars-and-cents world...unless she can prove there's more to the season—more to life—than money.

Mistletoe hung from a string. Directly over her.

"Kiss her, Brennan!" someone in the crowd called.

Mary Paige shook her head and waved off the comment.

"Yeah, kiss her!" More voices, more laughter.

In a panic she glanced over to where Brennan stood. He laughed and waved off the remarks.

"Kiss her!" More people. Clapping started. All were merry. All were bright. All were insane.

She raised her hands to her cheeks. They were afire with embarrassment. For heaven's sake, couldn't they see she was not the type of girl who got kissed by the Brennan Henrys of the world? She wasn't elegant, beautiful or—

"Oh," she said as Brennan loomed above her.

Her gaze found his and there was amusement in the gray depths...and maybe something more. Satisfaction?

Maybe. But she didn't have time to think any more about it.

Because at that moment Brennan kissed her.

Dear Reader,

I'm delighted to announce exciting news: beginning in January 2013, Harlequin Superromance books will be longer! That means more romance with more of the characters you love and expect from Harlequin Superromance.

We'll also be unveiling a brand-new look for our covers. These fresh, beautiful covers will showcase the six wonderful contemporary stories we publish each month.

So don't miss out on your favorite series—Harlequin Superromance. Look for longer stories and exciting new covers starting December 18, 2012, wherever you buy books.

In the meantime, check out this month's reads:

#1818 THE SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS

Liz Talley

#1819 THE TIME OF HER LIFE

Jeanie London

#1820 THE LONG WAY HOME

Cathryn Parry

#1821 CROSSING NEVADA

Jeannie Watt

#1822 WISH UPON A CHRISTMAS STAR

Darlene Gardner

#1823 ESPRESSO IN THE MORNING

Dorie Graham

Happy reading!

Wanda Ottewell,

Senior Editor, Harlequin Superromance

The Spirit of Christmas

Liz Talley



www.millsandboon.co.uk

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

From devouring the Harlequin Superromance novels on the shelf of her aunt's used bookstore to swiping her grandmother's medical romances, Liz Talley has always loved a good romance. So it was no surprise to anyone when she started writing a book one day while her infant napped. She soon found writing more exciting than scrubbing hardened cereal off the love seat. Underneath Liz's baby-food-stained clothes, a dream stirred. She followed that dream, and after a foray into historical romance and a Golden Heart final, she started her first contemporary romance on the same day she met her editor. Coincidence? She prefers to call it fate.

Currently Liz lives in north Louisiana with her high-school sweetheart, two beautiful children and a passel of animals. Liz loves watching her boys play baseball, shopping for bargains and going out for lunch. When not writing contemporary romances for the Harlequin Superromance line, she can be found doing laundry, feeding kids or playing on Facebook.

For Ursuline Academy, New Orleans, for teaching me the importance of Serviam—I will serve. I will always cherish my time walking those historic halls, teaching girls who could be angels one minute, devils the next and knitting together a foundation of education and service with the best faculty ever.

I may be gone, but my thoughts often drift back to the land of Merry Macs, Skips and Sioux. Go, Lions!

And for the readers who reliably buy my books and tell others how great they are—there is no greater compliment than a friend who is a devoted fan. Thank you.

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CHAPTER ONE

MARY PAIGE GENTRY stepped into an icy puddle of water as she exited the taxi with not only one high-heeled shoe, but both of them.

“Darn, darn, darn!” she said, trying to turn back to the driver without stepping into the cold water again. The cabbie raised bushy eyebrows and she tossed him a glare. “I assume you didn’t see that puddle when you pulled up?”

He shrugged.

“Yeah, right,” Mary Paige muttered, blowing out a breath that ruffled her bangs. “Just wait for me, okay?”

She didn’t hang around for his response because, after the day she’d had, something had to go in her favor. She slammed the door and leaped to the curb, managing to clear the puddle she’d previously waded through. Having the cab wait for her would cost a small fortune, but she was way late to her uncle’s infamous Christmas kickoff bash, thanks to her boss, Ivan the Terrible.

The frigid water seeped into the toes of her shoes as she walked toward the iron-barred glass door of the convenience store anchoring a corner in Fat City. Stupid, stupid! If she hadn’t let vanity rule, she’d be plodding around in her cute fleur-de-lis rubber boots with warm tootsies. But because the strappy high-heel, pseudo–Mary Janes had called her name that morning, she would risk frostbite for the remainder of the evening.

Flashing neon signs hung garishly on the front of the store, bright cousins to the various cigarette ads, and from somewhere to her left, music bled onto the street. The door to the convenience store swooshed open, and she moved aside to avoid a woman who burst out, clutching a paper bag containing a fifth of something potent. Her elbow caught Mary Paige’s arm, but the woman didn’t even acknowledge the offense. She merely growled something about skinny blonde bitches and waddled down the block.

“Really?” Mary Paige called after her, even as part of her relished the backhanded compliment since she’d spent the past two months doing Zumba and eating foam chips in an effort to fit into a size eight again. As she reached for the closing door handle, she heard a low moan to her right. Her hand paused in midair, hovering above the cold metal.

Pulling her jacket closer to her chin and nuzzling into the cashmere scarf her ex-boyfriend had given her last Christmas, Mary Paige peered into the darkness beyond the blinking lights lining the eaves. At first, she saw nothing in the shadows, but then spied movement.

She stepped toward the noise, her feet squishing in her wet shoes, her teeth starting to chatter. The light plink of sleet on her shoulders made her wonder if she was somewhere other than New Orleans. They rarely saw anything frozen—except daiquiris—so it had been quite the sensation when they’d gotten a blast of winter the day after Thanksgiving.

Newspapers stirred and she made out the form of an elderly man wrapped in a thin blanket, moving among discarded boxes and newspapers quickly becoming sodden with the sleet.

“Sir? You need some help?”

The man stopped his rustling and flipped her the finger.

“Guess that answers that question.”

She turned around, ignoring the tug at her heart. Why didn’t he go to a shelter, anyway? Too cold out for someone to be sitting around with nothing more than a thin blanket. She glanced to the corner and found the cab still waiting. Good. A man who listened. An early Christmas miracle.

She entered the warmth of the store, blew on her hands and scanned the cramped aisle. Nope, none of it would do. Bottled water, sanitary products and condoms. The necessities of life, sure, but nothing that would help her tonight.

The second aisle proved as fruitless. Nothing but potato chips, cartons of cookies and packages of those powdery little doughnuts. Mary Paige's stomach betrayed her with a growl as she eyed the pink snowballs. She shook her head and rounded the end cap, where she scanned the new offerings, methodically sweeping her gaze along the aisle, mentally discarding everything until... Bingo!

Hanging innocently at the end of the aisle was the most repugnant pair of Christmas socks she'd ever seen. They were bright green with sparkly silver-tinsel trees around the ankles, adorned with bright cherry-red pom-poms. The tops had garish silver lace that matched the flashy trees and small jingly bells. They were hideous and absolutely perfect for the white-elephant gift required for Uncle Fred's crazy pre-Christmas party. Mary Paige snatched them as if they were the Holy Grail. Finally, something had gone right.

She hurried toward the register, hating that she'd already taken too much time in this little stop, hating that the homeless curmudgeon outside the door weighed on her conscience. Yeah, he was a miserable old goat, but it was the beginning of the Christmas season, and it was colder than normal outside.

Perhaps she should get him a little something to warm him up?

A coffee bar sat to her right, featuring a self-service, instant cappuccino machine. Not the best, but certainly good enough. Mary Paige glanced at the register. Only one person in line. Surely five more minutes wouldn't hurt. She spun toward the bar, snatched a medium-size cup, centered it beneath the spout and pushed the button. It filled quickly. She plopped a lid on and grabbed two sugar packs along with a stir stick.

Darn. Two more people had joined the queue behind the woman paying.

She got in line, shifting back and forth on her frozen feet trying to restore the circulation and wondering why she even bothered with an old bum outside a convenience store in the middle of Metairie. He'd probably hurl the cup at her and ruin her only decent jacket. Par for the course considering the day she'd had. A run in her stockings, a nervous stomach that had sent her to the bathroom twice, a coffee stain on her pristine white blouse and a tongue-lashing from Ivan the Terrible when the towering pile of receipts on her desk didn't add up for their biggest client. She really wanted to go home and curl up in her ratty chenille robe with a glass of wine. Instead, fierce love for Uncle Fred sent her scurrying across the city in a cab she couldn't afford, wearing shoes now frozen stiff.

Mary Paige finally reached the register, where the cashier snatched the socks from her, scanned them and dropped them into a plastic sack.

"Ten thirty-seven," the cashier said, not even bothering to make eye contact with her.

Mary Paige rooted in her purse for her wallet. Ugh. She'd left it in her desk after doing some online Christmas shopping. But, luckily she always kept some cash in the side pocket along with her ATM card. Her fingers crisscrossed in a desperate search. No cash.

No way.

Thankfully a second swipe netted her the ATM card. She glanced at the cashier, who glared knowingly in return.

"Uh, do y'all have an ATM?"

The cashier pointed to a machine sitting below a glowing sign as a man behind her in line growled, "Jeez, get your cash before you get in line, lady."

Something inside Mary Paige snapped. "Listen, buddy. I have had a hell of a day and my ex-boyfriend stole all my cash. Give me an effing break here!"

The man stepped back, throwing up his hands before giving her a smart-ass gesture toward the ATM.

"Thanks."

She prayed as she entered her PIN that her account wasn't overdrawn. Things had been so hectic lately she couldn't remember the last time she balanced her bank statement. Please, please let the stupid machine spit out the money.

The machine whirled and coughed out the amount she'd requested—thirty bucks.

Whew. Hibernia Bank had just earned itself a place on her Christmas-card list.

Mary Paige popped back in line as the rude construction worker rolled his eyes and blew garlicky breath on her neck with theatrical exaggeration. Mary Paige shrugged at the cashier. "Happens to the best of us, right?"

The cashier held out a palm and gave no response, making Mary Paige feel like even more of an idiot. She placed a ten-dollar bill in the outstretched hand of the cashier along with three dimes and a nickel, the sum of all the change she could scrape up from the bottom of her purse. The cashier cleared her throat and looked pointedly at the money.

"Oh, sorry." Mary Paige scooped two pennies from the take-a-penny, leave-a-penny container on the counter. "There you go."

She grabbed the coffee and the plastic bag, swerved around Big and Beefy, desperately wanting to give him the finger—much as the old bum had given her earlier—and stalked out the door.

"Ow." Hot coffee splashed on her fingers through the open drinking spout. "Double darn it."

She shook the liquid from her fingers and caught sight of the cab out of the corner of her eye. Thank God he'd waited, and thank God the ATM had delivered the money she needed to pay for the cab. Shoving the bag with the socks under her arm, she held up a finger indicating she would be a minute longer, then headed around the corner to the old man.

As she approached the alley, she was swamped by a feeling of déjà vu. How many other times had she done this kind of thing? Ten? Twenty? More? As much as she would like to be a hard-ass career gal, she knew her heart was of the Stay Puft variety. Not even rudeness would deter her from doing what was right.

"Yoo-hoo? Mister? I have a little something here to warm you." She stood in front of a Dumpster bookended by two large cardboard boxes. Flaps hung over, providing little shelter, and the man seemed to be curled into a pile of wet newspapers. A broken cyclone fence stretched behind him, leading the way to an abandoned bakery showcasing yawning windows. Dismal wasn't the word for the small corner of the world this man occupied in the frozen rain. "Sir?"

He said nothing.

"I've brought you some coffee."

The papers moved. "What the hell ya want?"

"Just thought you might like something to warm you."

"Coffee?" The papers shifted as the man unfurled like a gray troll from beneath a bridge, his grizzled face parting sodden sales flyers, pinning her with sleepy blue eyes. "Coffee, did you say?"

Mary Paige thrust the cup toward the man.

His eyes swept Mary Paige from head to foot, causing a flash of alarm within her, but then he looked away before extending a thin arm toward the steaming cup. As he leaned forward, the papers parted, revealing a body woefully unprepared for the frigid weather. His pants were thin and patched, his flannel shirt threadbare in a few spots, but most frightening of all were his bare feet.

Aw, heck, no. Not bare feet. Anything but bare feet.

The plastic bag holding the socks grew heavier.

Pretend like you didn't see his bare feet, Mary Paige. Just hand him the coffee and go.

But she knew she would not. Could not.

Triple darn.

No time to get another pair. Plus, the only other socks inside were a pair of plain blue ones. There had been only one pair of perfectly horrendous Christmas socks, and she knew they hadn't been intended for anyone at Uncle Fred's house. Not Aunt Betty with her giant mole, or Cousin Trav

with his ugly comb-over, or Mr. Dan the eccentric butcher, who showed up to Uncle Fred's party every year uninvited. Nope, these Christmas socks were for the bum who had flipped her the finger.

She sighed and bent down, meeting his gnarled fingers with the cup. "You don't have any socks. It's awfully cold out here for bare feet."

The man took slurping sips of the scalding liquid as if it were nothing more than lukewarm tea. "Yes, socks t'would help, I imagine."

"Yes, well, I happen to have a pair right here. How about we put these on so you don't freeze your toes off? And then, I can take you to a shelter where you can get some hot food and a warm place to sleep."

The man peered at her over the rim, his disarming blue eyes measuring her. She ripped her gaze from his and dug the ugly socks from the plastic bag, eyeing his dirty but, oddly enough, well-manicured toes. She tore the tag from the socks and bent toward the man, uncertain as to whether she should actually lift his foot. "Should I help you put these on?"

The old man clasped her hands, stilling them as she picked at the sticker stubbornly gunking up a sparkly silver tree.

"You ever read A Christmas Carol?"

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"You know...old Ebenezer Scrooge?"

"Oh, yeah, of course." She nodded and the blunt ends of her bob swung into her eyes. She tucked the wayward strands behind her chilled ears. "The socks. Let's get them on you."

"Yes," he said staring at the gaudy socks in her hand. "What I meant was the Spirit of Christmas."

"What?" Mary Paige said biting her lip and scrunching each sock so she could jab them onto his almost-blue feet. "You mean the ghosts, like the ghosts of Christmas past?"

"They were all part of the Spirit of Christmas, right?" His voice was low, intense and raspy... and also quite refined. Odd for a street person. She slid the first sock on his right foot.

"Mmm-hmm." She shifted her weight so she wouldn't fall on her butt onto the slick concrete. She wasn't the most graceful of gals.

"Well, you're the Spirit of Christmas," he said, jabbing a finger at her.

"Maybe so," she said, hoping to pacify the old man, as she put the other sock on his deathly cold foot. She prayed she had hand sanitizer in her purse. No telling where the man's feet had been even if he had trimmed his toenails.

"There. Nice and toasty. Let's get you out of this weather." She prepared to rise, but the man clasped her wrist. She pulled away but he held firm.

"I'm sorry I was rude to you earlier."

"That's okay. You're enduring a hard time right now," Mary Paige said, trying to wrench her arm from his grip, growing uncomfortable with his familiarity. "Living out on the streets makes a man defensive. I understand. If you will let go of me, I will see that the cab driver pulls around so we can find you a nearby shelter."

The man ignored her. "What's your name, my child?"

Mary Paige stared into his hypnotic blue eyes and responded without thinking. "Mary Paige."

"Well, Mary Paige, can I offer you a gift in return for the one you have given me?"

She shook her head. Jeez. There was no telling what the bum would give her. Visions of grimy bottle caps or shiny pieces of glass danced in her head. What valuable object would soon be hers? "You owe me nothing. Now let's get—"

Her words died as the man released her hand and fished around inside the pocket of his worn flannel shirt. Dear Lord, please don't let it be his old socks. Or something dead.

She should get out of here. The old man could be nuts, rooting around for something more sinister than a piece of old junk. He could have a gun. Or a knife. Or...a piece of paper.

The man held a paper that had been folded several times and smiled at her, his teeth remarkably straight and white. A gold crown winked at her from the back of his mouth, sparkling as much as his blue eyes. “I needed to know your name, my child, so I know what to write on this.”

He unfolded the paper and extended it to her. She took it as if she were in a trance before finally glancing down.

It was a check.

She blinked.

It was a check for two million dollars.

Signed by Malcolm Henry, Jr.

The Malcolm Henry, Jr., of Henry Department Stores.

She blinked. “I don’t understand. Where did you get this?”

He grinned. “My child, you are the Spirit of Christmas.”

A flash of light blinded her, forcing her to squinch her eyes together. When she opened them, she found another man emerging from behind the Dumpster. The light was so blinding and her feet were now so numbed by the cold, she stumbled back, tilted and fell, landing hard on the icy pavement.

She tried to get up, but her legs failed to comply, so she sat there feeling water seep through the seat of her newest skirt, no doubt ruining the charcoal tweed and her favorite silk panties.

The elderly man stood and shrugged into a long cashmere coat the cameraman handed him while shoving feet still clad in the garish Christmas socks into a pair of lined hunting boots stored within one of the cardboard boxes. Then he extended one hand to her. She took it, bobbing her glance nervously toward the man filming the oddest thing that had ever happened to her—and she’d had plenty of oddness in her life...she’d once been bitten by a llama, for heaven’s sake. She still held the check, so she shoved it toward the older man, who didn’t look so much like a bum anymore. His coat probably cost a week’s salary. Maybe a month’s.

He waved the check away. “No, no. That’s all yours. I feared we wouldn’t find a kind soul at all. Been doing this for four straight days.”

She didn’t say anything. Merely stood there. Shocked.

“By the way, I’d like to introduce myself. I’m Malcolm Henry, and I must tell you I love these socks.”

CHAPTER TWO

BRENNAN HENRY STUDIED the huge Christmas tree towering in front of the glass elevator of his office building. The thing was nearly thirty feet tall and took up so much space on the marble floor everyone had to walk several feet out of the natural path to the elevators. And the lights blinked in time with loud holiday music that spilled from overhead speakers.

Ridiculous.

He would have his secretary pen a strongly worded letter to the owner of the building—who happened to be his grandfather. Didn’t matter. A letter would be official. After all, Brennan didn’t mind people enjoying the upcoming holiday season, but not at the expense of others.

The elevator shot up to the top floor and swooshed open, revealing the tasteful lobby of MBH Industries, the company bearing his great-grandfather’s initials. An attractive receptionist gave an automatic smile, which deepened when she saw him stride out. “Good morning, Mr. Henry.”

Brennan gave her little more than his normal clipped smile. “Mr. Henry is my grandfather, Cheryl.”

She laughed because it was a game they played every day. A small flirty little game he allowed himself, like an extra shot of cream in his coffee. He pushed on toward his office in a far corner, and entered his assistant’s area.

“Good morning, Brennan,” Sophie Caruso said, looking up from her keyboard and spinning toward the antique sideboard housing the coffee. The office smelled like cinnamon rolls fresh out of the oven and his stomach growled.

“Good morning, Sophie. You have those quarterly sales reports from Mark yet?”

She pressed the button on the one-cup coffee machine before sifting through the folders on the corner of her desk. “Right here. They were waiting for you this morning.”

She pulled a folder covered with lime-green and red paisleys from the stack of plain manila and held it toward him.

He looked at it as though she’d handed him a writhing rattlesnake.

“What?” she asked. “He’s trying to get into the spirit and swears paisleys are all the rage this year.”

“This is a place of business,” Brennan muttered, downing some coffee and heading toward his office, holding the ridiculous folder with the reports Mark had promised. Next time, Brennan would request his director of marketing send them as an email attachment. Mark was adamant about using a highlighter and doing things old-school. He swore it kept him from missing important trends, but if the man kept decorating his folders like a schoolgirl on crack, Brennan would insist on electronic versions.

He pushed the intercom button on his desk. “Hey, Mrs. Caruso, could you bring me a plain—”

The door opened and his assistant entered with a manila folder and his second cup of coffee.

“You’re wonderful,” he said, accepting the mug and placing it next to the nearly empty one, before sliding the stapled reports he’d already pulled from the colored folder into the much more businesslike one she handed him.

“I know,” she said, turning toward the door. She spun around and snapped her fingers, the motion making her silver-strewn brown hair stand out like a flying saucer. “Your grandfather called and said he was bringing by the centerpiece for the new ad campaign. Said you needed to call Ellen and have her sit in on the meeting. Boardroom B at ten.”

She shut the door before he could mutter a really dirty word under his breath.

Oh, sure. He had nothing better to do than to be at the beck and call of his grandfather’s shenanigans. What had happened to the hard-nosed captain of industry who had brought their company into the twenty-first century? Where had the iron-fisted, no-nonsense head of the most successful chain of small department stores in the South gone?

Because the man who’d flown a kite from the top of the building last week wasn’t him. If the past few months were any indicator, Malcolm Henry, Jr.’s cheese had slid off his cracker.

Hell, the man sat up front with his driver holding a wiener dog he’d named Izzy in his lap. If that wasn’t damning evidence, Brennan didn’t know what was.

He couldn’t wrap his mind around the change in the man who had skipped most of his grandson’s birthday parties because there had been work to attend to. His grandfather had even arrived late at Brennan’s graduation because of an emergency board-of-directors meeting about an acquisition of a small chain of stores on the East Coast. Malcolm Henry had been the sharpest businessman in the Crescent City...and now he called bingo at the local homeless shelter on Friday nights.

Brennan picked up the phone. “Get me Ellen. Please.”

The VP of communications and community relations, who was also his second cousin, answered on the third ring. “Bivens.”

“Ellen, tell me my grandfather isn’t going through with this crazy promo idea.”

“Your grandfather isn’t going through with this crazy promo.”

“You’re lying.”

“Of course I am. You told me to.”

Okay, so he had.

“We can’t throw money away like this. Giving a random stranger millions of dollars is irresponsible in this economy. We have investors who will flip when they find out MBH is handing out money capriciously.”

“Wait a sec, it’s not the company’s money.”

“You mean he’s using our money for this?” Something hot slid into his gut. It wasn’t as though his grandfather couldn’t do what he wished with his own money. But over the past six months, the man had shelled out huge chunks of money to pet nonprofit agencies. Giving money away to a perfect stranger, declaring him or her the Spirit of Christmas and mapping out some crazy publicity stunt sounded dangerously negligent.

Worry started eating away at Brennan. What if the heart attack his grandfather had suffered six months ago had done other damage—like to Malcolm’s head? Maybe a mild stroke that had gone misdiagnosed? His grandfather had always been extremely careful in spending money, both in business and his personal life.

Brennan wasn’t ready to watch his grandfather turn senile, ineffective and dotty in his advanced age. He wasn’t ready to let go of the one solid presence in his life.

“That’s what he indicated,” Ellen said, clearing her throat uncomfortably. “I assumed you had spoken with him about this. We’ve been working on this for three months.”

His grandfather had spoken to him. Brennan had just failed to “hear” the plan. “I have, but I was unaware of the particulars, and, honestly, I had hoped this crazy idea would fall by the wayside. After all, we have the Magic in the Lights gala coming up benefiting Malcolm’s Kids. Grandfather has plenty of charitable causes to pursue, all of which demonstrate the Spirit of the Season.”

“Actually, this idea of his is brilliant from a marketing perspective. All I have to do is splash this story on the front of the Times-Picayune, and we’re golden. You can’t buy this sort of goodwill.”

Brennan frowned. “Story?”

“He didn’t tell you how he found the person he wants to use as the center point?”

“No.”

An awkward pause hung on the line, and he could tell Ellen didn’t know if she should be the bearer of the news or not.

He saved her the trouble. “No problem. I’ll get to the bottom of it when we meet in Boardroom B at ten. I’ll see you then.”

“Meeting? I can’t attend—I have a report I have to submit to Don before the end of the day.”

“Grandfather called it regarding this foolishness.”

“Oh, well, then I guess I can’t refuse Malcolm.”

Of course you can’t. He still writes the checks around here.

Brennan set the phone in the cradle and looked at his desk. He had too much to deal with to worry over his grandfather’s stunt. He had a conference call at 9:00 a.m. about a new cosmetics line by some Hollywood starlet the company was considering for the stores, and he still needed to look at the reports Mark had sent so he could talk to the CFO, Don Angelle, about procuring extra commercial spots to be aired over Mardi Gras.

No time for crazy Spirit of Christmas ideas. Not when a healthy bottom line demanded more than mistletoe and Yule logs.

Bah, humbug.

He snorted at that thought. Man, he really was like Scrooge. Next thing, he’d be shuffling only one small lump of coal onto the fire to save a measly buck.

And with his grandfather pissing away all their money, he might be forced to play the Dickens character.

* * *

MARY PAIGE TAPPED HER FOOT in time with the Christmas music spilling out of the speakers, mouthing words about sleigh rides and walking in winter wonderlands. A huge Christmas tree sat on a platform in front of the lobby fountain, blinking in time with the music. She loved it and wished she knew how to sync music with her own small tree that she’d put up last weekend.

The doors slid open and she stepped inside the glass elevator with a well-dressed woman and pressed the button that would take her to the twentieth floor. As the doors closed, her stomach flipped over.

Maybe she should have told Mr. Henry she wasn't interested. No one in her right mind would give up two million dollars, but Mr. Henry wanted her to basically take a break from her job to be his poster girl for bringing the true meaning of Christmas to the Crescent City. Her boss, Ivan, hadn't been happy about her taking the morning off, and she still had half a study book to get through in preparation for her certified public accountant exam, which loomed in a couple of months. It felt like she'd be sacrificing all she'd been working so hard for.

Still, it was two million dollars.

And she was in her right mind. Mostly.

Late last night she'd considered all the things she could do with the money—pay off student loans, buy a car that didn't have rust spots around the wheel well and make donations to all her favorite charities. And she could help her mom pay off the loans taken to modify their old farmhouse to accommodate her brother's wheelchair. Yeah, two million could do a lot of good in her life...and in the lives of others.

So she should probably sign the agreement, cash the check and count herself a lucky duck... even if it meant tugging on a Santa hat and making merry with the entire city of New Orleans for the holiday season.

Besides, if during the meeting with Mr. Henry the whole crazy proposal felt like too much for her to handle, she'd refuse. She wasn't locked in to anything and had done nothing more with the check than hide it in the bottom of the ballerina jewelry box her granny Wyatt had giving her for her twelfth birthday.

"Are you with MBH?" the woman standing next to her asked with a polite smile.

"Uh, no," Mary Paige said, smoothing her skirt over her thighs, hoping the bottom of her Spanx wasn't showing. The skirt had fit her four years ago, and even though she'd lost weight, it was still a little too tight. She hadn't had time to go by the cleaners to pick up her more professional clothes, so she'd held her breath that morning and zipped. It worked but she had to keep tugging the hem into place because it inched up as she walked.

The other woman was dressed in a fine wool suit that fit her to perfection. A patterned raspberry-colored scarf was knotted at her neck, and her dark, heeled boots were absolutely gorgeous. She looked like an ad out of *Vanity Fair*.

"I'm just going to a meeting." Mary Paige swallowed her nervousness and pasted on a smile. She was glad she'd used the flatiron on her hair this morning. At the very least her short blond pageboy cut flattered her elfish chin and helped her feel more together than she was.

The woman tossed her wavy brown mane over her shoulders and nodded at Mary Paige as she stepped out into the lobby of MBH Industries.

A pretty receptionist looked up as the brunette walked by her desk. "Oh, Ms. Thornhill, Mr. Henry has a meeting soon."

"Really?" the brunette said, not bothering to even slow her steps. Instead, she pushed through the frosted glass doors to the inner sanctum, letting them swing shut after her.

The receptionist frowned and muttered something under her breath before donning a bright smile. "Welcome to MBH. Can I assist you?"

"Uh, hi. I'm Mary Paige Gentry, and I have an appointment with Mr. Malcolm Henry?"

Darn it. Why had she phrased it like a question? Like she was uncertain?

"Oh, of course," the receptionist, whose nameplate read Cheryl Reeves, said with a genuine smile. "Have a seat and I'll let Mr. Henry know you've arrived."

Mary Paige pointed her sensible heels toward the seating area housing several glossy magazines and a beautiful orchid on a glass table and sat on the leather Barcelona chair.

Just as she perched on the edge of the chair—tugging the tight skirt over the edge of her Spanx—the frosted glass doors swung open.

But Mr. Malcolm Henry didn't emerge.

Instead it was a Roman god wearing an expensive-looking suit and a scowl. He zeroed in on Cheryl as Ms. Thornhill lollygagged behind him with annoyance evident in her brown eyes. "Cheryl, will you see that Creighton gets a cup of tea while she waits for me."

It wasn't a question.

"Of course, Mr. Henry," Cheryl said, rising from behind her desk. "I—" She snapped her mouth closed when Creighton shot her a warning.

"Don't bother with tea, Brennan," Creighton said, laying a hand on his forearm as if she could soothe the fiercest of beasts. "I have other things to attend to this morning. I thought you might be free for a little chat this morning. Nothing important."

Innocuous words, but not the way she said them. Creighton—the well-dressed, gorgeous brunette—had purred them, with a sort of raspy innuendo that made poor Cheryl pinken like a... a...shrimp.

"Good," he said, looking at the brunette as if he didn't appreciate the implication of what a little chat was.

"Fine," Creighton said, heading for the elevators with staccato click-clacks of her heeled boots.

Mary Paige shifted on the slick leather as the woman walked by, then slid right off the chair onto the floor in a graceless heap.

All three people in the lobby turned and looked at her.

"Oh, are you all right?" Cheryl squeaked, hurrying toward her.

The man named Henry—but not Malcolm Henry—got there first.

Mary Paige looked at him standing over her. His brow was furrowed and he reminded her of how her younger brother had once looked at a baby bird that had fallen from the pecan tree in front of their house—confused, alarmed and sympathetic. She knew she was the color of her sweater—a vibrant fuchsia—and could do nothing other than laugh. Falling twice in twenty-four hours? Had to be a record.

Her laughter seemed to really confuse him.

He glanced at Cheryl, who pressed her lips together as if she were afraid she'd join in the giggling, and asked, "Who is this?"

Mary Paige swallowed her laughter and struggled to fold her legs under her, praying the man wouldn't spot her modern version of a girdle. Her heels failed to make traction so she looked even more awkward and her skirt rode even farther up her thighs.

Damn it.

His gaze zeroed in on the stretchy nude fabric, cutting into her white legs—yeah, her summer tan was long gone—and she saw the question in his gray eyes. He didn't say anything as he made eye contact with her and extended a hand. She grabbed hold and let him haul her to her feet.

Again he asked, "Who are you?"

Creighton wore a bemused smile as she pointed to Mary Paige and said, "I think that's your ten o'clock."

Mary Paige pulled her hand away and jerked the skirt down where it should be—just above the knee. The elevator opened and Creighton gave them all a little finger wiggle and a cat-full-of-cream smile as she glided inside. The doors slid closed as Mary Paige, Cheryl and the grumpy sex god watched.

Mary Paige smoothed her hands against the shiny fabric of the chair and tried to smile, hopefully distracting him from the fact she'd wallowed like a sow on the floor of the lobby. "Um, slick chair, huh?"

The man bent and scooped up her checkbook, tube of lip gloss and cell-phone charger that had spilled from her purse when she'd taken her epic tumble. He passed them to her. "Are you sure you're okay?"

She wasn't sure if it was legitimate concern or more of a legal thing. "Yeah, my dignity's a little bruised, but otherwise, I can walk."

His stormy eyes perused her and it made her feel squirmy, not necessarily in a pervy way, but more in a crackly way. The man may have been fierce-looking, but he was abnormally handsome. If not a little scary. It wasn't his size because he was a little over six feet, but it was the way his confidence oozed. No, not oozed. Conquered. The man conquered a room, demanding attention by his sheer presence.

She stuck out a clammy hand. "Hi, I'm Mary Paige Gentry. I'm to meet with Mr. Malcolm Henry, Jr."

The man took her hand. "So you are our ten o'clock?"

She shrugged. How was she supposed to know who his ten-o'clock appointment was?

His touch was warm and dry, which was good considering her hand had started sweating. Coming here wearing a too-tight skirt for a meeting about two million dollars then sprawling onto the floor and showing her "light" support girdle didn't inspire serenity in a gal. She waited for an introduction.

A little tremor went through him—subtle but noticeable—before he dropped her hand. "I'm Brennan Henry, Malcolm's grandson. I'm also the VP of acquisitions, and I'll be sitting in on this meeting. If you'll follow me, I'll see if I can find where my grandfather is hiding, and we can get down to brass tacks regarding this...venture."

She nodded. He didn't sound very pleased about this...venture, but she wasn't so sure about it, either. When Mr. Henry had helped her from the icy pavement—thus establishing a habit of Henry men hauling up clumsy blondes who fell on their asses—he'd explained his idea for bringing the true meaning of the holiday season to the city. And it had sounded sweet but implausible.

After all, how could she be the Spirit of Christmas?

She was an accountant...not even a certified one at that. She had nothing special that would mark her as the epitome of, well, anything. She had blond hair that she highlighted herself every two months to save a buck, she shopped at bargain stores and grew her own herbs under a growing light. And not those kind of herbs. Basil, thyme and rosemary. She skipped to the end of books to find out if there was a happily ever after before she read them and her bottom was a little too big for her frame. She was plain ol' Mary Paige from Crosshatch, Louisiana. Well, not even Crosshatch, considering she'd grown up on an organic farm five miles from the town-limit sign.

So how was she supposed to inspire the citizens of the city to be kinder, gentler and more loving as they enjoyed the holiday season?

Uh, yeah. Sounded like a really weird idea, but for two million dollars—money that could help more people than herself—Mary Paige supposed she could at the very least hear the man out.

Brennan held open the door from which he'd emerged minutes ago.

Well, at least he was a gentleman.

She slid by, praying she'd remembered to put on deodorant that morning. She really couldn't recall, and she could feel the anxiety seeping from her pores. Like literally.

"This way," he said, his voice all rich and yummy, like a vanilla cupcake—a particular favorite of hers and one of the reasons her bottom was a little jigglier than it should be. He might be aloof but his voice had a warm timbre, the kind made for reading bedtime stories. Yes, naughty bedtime stories.

She dashed the thought of Brennan in her bedroom from her mind and followed him to a room labeled Boardroom B, where Mr. Malcolm Henry, Jr. stood holding something aloft. Below him sat an adorable red dachshund, balancing on his back legs with front paws waving in begging fashion.

Mr. Henry tossed the dog something, which it caught neatly, then turned to them with a sparkle in his bright blue eyes. “Miss Gentry, my own sweet Spirit of Christmas. You came.”

The older man looked much different than he had last night. The dapper navy suit with a whimsical red bow tie complemented his tanned skin, and the cordovan loafers had to be Italian—only because that’s what they always were on the wealthy men in the books she’d snuck from her mother’s bedside table.

“Good morning, Mr. Henry,” she said, moving close to the little dog looking up at the older man with expectant, beaded black eyes. “What a precious pup.”

She bent and held out a hand and the dog trotted to her, sniffed her hand and allowed her to pet him.

“Her name is Izzy,” Mr. Henry said, bending down and bestowing a kiss on the animal’s head. “She’s a good girl, aren’t you?”

A full minute was spent in admiration of Izzy, who rolled over and gave them her belly to scratch.

“I love dogs,” Mary Paige said, dutifully scratching Izzy’s satiny chest. “I had a golden retriever growing up. Toby was the best dog ever. He’s buried under our pink dogwood because he always loved that tree best.”

“Ahem.” The sound came from above them.

Mary Paige stopped prattling and glanced at Brennan Henry.

He appeared disgusted. “Do you two mind?”

“Sorry,” she said, standing and tugging her skirt. Again. “Never could resist a sweet face.”

Brennan pulled a chair out from the table for her as his grandfather headed around to the armchair at one end. The dog loyally trotted after him, curling at his feet with an adorable doggy sigh.

“Brennan isn’t fond of dogs,” Mr. Henry said with a secret smile.

“Well, you wouldn’t be, either, if you’d been humiliated at your tenth birthday party by a clown’s dog.”

Mr. Henry laughed. “That dog went to town on your leg, didn’t he?”

Brennan glowered. “I don’t think we need to bring that up. This is a meeting, right?”

Mary Paige sat—glad the chair had armrests to cling to—and hid a smile as she pulled hand sanitizer out of her purse and squirted some in her palm. She rubbed them together as Mr. Henry retold the story of his meeting Mary Paige, to which his grandson said a grand sum of...nothing.

As he’d finished talking about the check, the boardroom door opened and an older woman wearing an ivory suit entered. She carried several folders and a travel mug. “Apologies for being late. Don’s barking up my tree on these reports.”

The woman set her things opposite Mary Paige and held out a hand. “Hi, I’m Ellen Bivens, vice president of communications and community relations.”

Mary Paige shook her hand and introduced herself, glad to have another woman to break up the testosterone oozing from one end of the boardroom table. Ellen looked to be around fifty years in age with a long face and quick smile. Mary Paige liked her on sight.

Mr. Henry cracked his knuckles. “Okay, time to talk turkey. This young woman is exactly the kind of person we wanted for this campaign. We’re pulling out the stops for this—TV, radio and print. Hell, we’re even using that social media everyone’s talking about. It’s time to bring goodness back to Christmas. Rip down the sparkly tinsel and self-serving commercialism. I want the world to know that Henry’s embraces the spirit of service as part of the season.”

Ellen nodded, flipping through a folder. “This campaign is brilliant. With so many other companies embracing ‘me,’ it’s a good strategy to focus on this season being a time of sharing with others, reveling in the spirit of community, a time—”

“For making lots of money,” Brennan added.

Mary Paige glared at the sexy grandson with his fingers tented in front of him.

What an ass.

"Excuse me," Mary Paige said, scooting her chair back. "If this is only about making money, I'll have to decline."

Brennan cocked his head. "Decline?"

Mr. Henry waved a hand. "Rest assured, dear girl. This is not about the bottom line, but the greater good. It's about what you showed an old bum who had a need. It's about the milk of human kindness."

"But the bottom line is important," his grandson persisted.

Mary Paige directed her attention to the ass. "I'm not interested in tricking people so you can make a buck. It's deceitful to pretend the holiday is about showing love to your fellow man when you have a different motivation behind it. I can't imagine something so..."

His eyes clouded.

"Well, let's just say, I'll not be part of it." She turned her attention to Mr. Henry as she rose. Something about Brennan made her uncomfortable. Not just his concern for the almighty buck, but his distaste for his grandfather's plan. She could feel cynicism sheet off him in waves.

And maybe part of her discomfort was she was attracted to the man...a man who was about as far away from her usual type as she could get. Scary. "Thank you for the offer, Mr. Henry, but I'm not interested in being the Spirit of Christmas for Henry Department Stores."

Brennan stood politely, ever the Southern gentleman, a mixture of triumph and relief on his face. "So you'll be returning the check, then?"

CHAPTER THREE

BRENNAN WATCHED THE blonde with interest. What would she say at the thought of handing that two-million-dollar check back to his grandfather? Sure, she could buy a man a cup of coffee, but anyone could have done that...even an ax murderer. Here was the litmus test of her character.

Mary Paige shot him a look that curled something in his gut, and he felt the way he had when he'd disappointed someone he cared about. Except he didn't care about this woman. So why did she make him feel like scum? His job was to take care of his grandfather and this company, and that included safeguarding the bottom line. Lord, she made it sound like it was wrong to pursue profit.

"Of course I'll give the money back," she said, picking up her purse. "I certainly wouldn't keep it if I couldn't uphold my end of the deal."

"No, please wait, Miss Gentry," his grandfather said, standing and waving a gentling hand in her direction. "I think you've gotten off on the wrong foot with my grandson. Brennan doesn't mean to come across so harshly. He's looking out—"

"For this company." Brennan gave his grandfather a nod that said he could fight his own battles. "I'm sorry if that offends you, but we're a business and thus responsible to our shareholders and employees to, you know, make a profit—nasty word, though it is."

She hesitated and he wondered if this was what she'd been after in the first place. Was she faking do-gooder or was she sincere? He couldn't tell. He'd never been great at reading women. His grandfather alone had raised him and there hadn't been a steady female influence in his life, so he didn't always trust the fairer sex. The women he was accustomed to were soothed by pretty words and shiny baubles...and would never give back two million dollars without a fight.

"Please, sit. Let's try this again." It was his one acquiescence to his grandfather. He didn't like the idea of this whole Spirit of Christmas thing, but after hearing Ellen's take, the idea had rolled around in his head, carving a comfortable nook in his thoughts of the image the company should present and, yes, the profit generated from the way they positioned themselves.

Ellen smiled. "You're obviously a good soul, Mary Paige, so I know corporate considerations can be, well, conflicting in their intent."

Mary Paige nodded. "I'm an accountant, Ellen. I understand the concept."

An accountant? His mind flashed to her tangle of arms and legs in the lobby...and that interesting piece of Lycra. Something about her wasn't businesslike and he couldn't see her chained behind a desk tapping on an enormous calculator.

"Oh, really?" Ellen said, eyeing Mary Paige. "Very interesting."

Mary Paige shifted her gaze from Ellen to the dog. "Listen, I see what you're trying to do, Mr. Henry, and it's admirable. It's actually a really sweet idea, but I'm not sure I'm comfortable in the limelight."

His grandfather smiled. "Don't worry, dear. Brennan will be right beside you every step of the way. We're not throwing you out front to tap-dance. We want the face of MBH beside you, showing all of the country we here in New Orleans believe in good works and good cheer."

The hell Brennan would be right beside her. He wasn't sure what the old man had up his sleeve, but if he thought Brennan would gallop all over this city with a silly grin on his face escorting the clumsy accountant as she put on a dog and pony show spreading Christmas cheer, he was certifiable.

In fact, maybe Brennan needed to pursue that possibility. Testing the old man to certify he was missing a few spokes on his wheel.

"Him?" Mary Paige pointed to Brennan.

"Once upon a time Brennan loved Christmas and his goal in life wasn't to frighten small children."

Ellen snorted.

"I'm not interested in promo stunts," Brennan said. "You like that sort of thing, Grandfather, so you do it."

"If you want to be the next CEO," his grandfather said, "the public needs to see you as the face of the company. Not me. Besides, I have a full calendar."

"And I don't? I'm trying to run this company, and I don't think the board of directors would appreciate the future CEO gallivanting around trimming trees and singing carols. I need to maintain a stable public image. This is ridiculous."

And it was. He was not babysitting his grandfather's project. If the old man wanted a Spirit of Christmas campaign, fine, but it had nothing to do with Brennan. Besides, it was illogical to spring it on him five weeks before Christmas. It felt a day late, a dollar short and very, very nutty.

"I don't see how standing next to Scrooge here and faking merry is going to help you spread Christmas cheer." The light from the window caught Mary Paige's hair, creating a golden curtain around her pleasant face. He really liked the wholesome thing she had going on. She didn't wear a lot of makeup or any heavy perfumes. When she'd passed him earlier, she'd smelled light and clean, like fresh laundry and sunshine. Like some crap on a commercial...but, he'd liked it.

And she'd just called him Scrooge.

"It will do more than you know, Mary Paige. Ol' Scrooge here—" his grandfather gestured toward Brennan "—needs to be a poster boy for Henry's in this city. I've seen him put on a smile when it behooves, and it need behoove him now if he wishes to move on to the large chair in the biggest office. The success of this company is not in the bottom line, but in the values we embrace and show to the world. I'll let it be known here and now that we have genuine concern for our fellow man. If that is the focus, it trickles down into every square inch of every store across the country."

Brennan had to mull that one over. Maybe his grandfather had a point. Sometimes it was hard for Brennan to see the forest for the bottom line. His goal was profit, but that alone would not sustain the company.

"I want you to understand, Miss Gentry, that this Spirit of Christmas campaign is not about making more money, but rather bringing something back I've been missing for so many years in my own life. It has been too long since I've felt the wonder of kindness and the generosity of my fellow man. I know change starts with me. I am looking at the man in the mirror each morning and expecting something more."

Brennan glanced at Mary Paige and he could see the cogwheels rotating through the windows of those chocolate-brown eyes.

“How can I help?” she asked. “By showing up at events wearing my best smile? How is that going to make anyone feel any more charitable toward a fellow human being?”

“I have a hunch about you, my dear.” The confidence in Malcolm’s expression seemed to say he knew something no one else in the room did. “A very strong hunch about what you can accomplish in even the hardest of hearts.” He then looked at Brennan with a sort of gleam in his eye.

Oh, hell, no. If his grandfather had some sort of notion about Mary Paige performing a bypass on the hardened parts of his ticker, he was sadly mistaken. Brennan wasn’t damaged or bitter. He was merely a realist. And he absolutely did not need another woman in his life—not when he couldn’t seem to shed Creighton at the moment. She’d become like a latex coating on his fingers...preventing him from feeling anything. He really wished he’d left her alone. Wished she’d get the message he’d tried to send her many times over the past few weeks.

So even if he felt a weird interest in the accountant, he wasn’t letting his grandfather cook up some crazy matchmaking scheme with a stranger he’d picked up at a gas station.

But this blonde wasn’t dumb. She narrowed her eyes at the old man then shifted her gaze to him.

“This is about Christmas, right? I mean, you’re not trying to give me a babysitting job with McScrooge here, are you? I’m no miracle worker, Mr. Henry.”

“Babysitting?” Brennan echoed, trying not to frown and scare poor misguided Little Bo Peep. “I’m not the one who fell on my ass in the lobby then crawled across a boardroom to fawn over some cur.”

Izzy lifted her head and gave him a doggy glare as if she knew he’d slighted her.

Brennan tapped the arm of his chair. “Someone might need babysitting, but it’s not the guy wearing the striped tie and sitting in this chair.”

Mary Paige blinked at him, making him feel a little childish for being so defensive. What was wrong with him? He never got emotional during business meetings. Of course, this was one of the strangest meetings, but nevertheless, he had to get hold of the situation. No way would he try to convince her to do this. If she refused, it would likely be game over for his grandfather’s little idea. One less headache for Brennan.

“Before we send out a press release or make any further plans, why not do a test run?” his grandfather said, settling back into his chair and folding his hands across his still-flat stomach.

“Like what?” Mary Paige looked as if she might bolt for the door at any second.

Her reaction to him struck Brennan as odd. Most women found him charming. Okay, not charming, but intriguing. After all, he wasn’t half-bad to look at, had money in the bank and treated them like ladies. What was this chick’s problem? Hadn’t he helped her from her fall, picked up her lipstick and held the door for her? He hadn’t been an ogre. But she’d been treating him like he had horns. It was almost as if she didn’t want to participate in the gig because she’d have to spend time with him.

So he was a bit grumpy this morning. And not totally on board with the whole Spirit of Christmas idea. Was that good reason to act like he was the Antichrist?

Or maybe just anti-Christmas?

Perhaps that was it. The woman was a bona fide Christmas jingle-bell ringer. Probably decorated her whole house with flashing lights and little red-nosed reindeer statues.

“Why not take Miss Gentry down for a cup of that new eggnog coffee they’re brewing at CC’s? Show her your sweet side, grandson o’ mine,” Malcolm said.

It wasn’t a suggestion...it was an order—iron buffered with gentility. His grandfather may have been slurping down the Froot Loops lately, but he was still his grandfather, the man who’d nearly single-handedly built Henry’s into a reputable, reliable chain of department stores with net worth that kept Wall Street’s eye on them. So if Malcolm Henry said “Jump,” folks asked, “How high?” But

Brennan wasn't folks. He was the heir to the throne with the key almost in his pocket. Wasn't it time he stopped dancing to his grandfather's tune? "I'm sure Miss Gentry has other business—"

"Yes, I do," she agreed quickly.

Her eagerness to avoid him stopped him. The woman didn't even want to go to coffee with him? Good Lord, when was the last time a woman had turned him down? Hardly ever. From the time he'd been knee-high, everyone had jumped to do his bidding, to be his friend, to have some of the limelight given to the Henry name shine on them. But this little accountant didn't want a thing to do with him...and that made her more interesting than her willingness to hand back the check.

"Maybe we should get better acquainted." He stood and politely pulled her chair back as she rose.

Her hair swished in front of his nose, releasing a light scent of innocence and simplicity that tumbled him briefly into childhood. He breathed deeply, then exhaled into the silky strands. And he felt her tense in awareness.

Something flared between them, causing an almost uncontrollable urge for naughtiness to overtake him. The wisp of an idea curled into his brain, featuring Mary Paige in silk stockings and a red-and-white Santa-styled push-up bra. Her ass would be spectacular in a garter and thong. And her smile. So warm and promising.

Ellen's phone went off, drawing everyone's attention to the BlackBerry jittering on the table. He popped the picture of Mary Paige playing the sexy ingenue from his mind with his handy dandy pin of reality. For heaven's sake, the woman was wearing some girdle thing that was about as sexy as corn bread.

Mary Paige stepped back, almost brushing against him. "I'm sorry. I'm not playing games with you, Mr. Henry. I'm merely convinced I'm not the right girl to be your holiday spirit. I've a lot on my plate, and while the money would be nice, I think it best if I bow out."

"Coward," Brennan murmured in her ear before he could catch himself. He had no clue why he'd issued the challenge. What did he care if she stomped out of the office, handed over the check and the whole stupid holiday stunt crashed and burned? He didn't. But something inside him had balked at watching Miss Mary Sunshine slip through his fingers.

He felt her response—the slight outrage, the nervousness at his presence invading her space and a little bit of the right kind of interest—just before she moved away.

"Okay, maybe just coffee," she said.

"Splendid," his grandfather crowed, leaning forward to toss a file onto the table. "Ellen and I have some work to do while you two talk about a partnership that will make this the best season for Henry Department Stores in its history...a season of kindness."

Brennan ignored his grandfather's donning of Christmas-colored glasses and gestured toward the door, allowing Mary Paige to slide through before following. He couldn't stop himself from watching her really nice backside.

She spun around as the boardroom door closed and caught him looking. Her face went pink again and she pointed a finger at him. "If you think I'm sleeping with you, you're nuts. This is a business meeting."

His reconnaissance skills with regard to the opposite sex weren't usually this rusty. While many in New Orleans thought him a playboy, he truly didn't sleep around that much. He was no walking hormone even as visions of Mary Paige in sexy Santa lingerie had him tilting that way. "Since when is going for coffee code for sex? Jump to conclusions much?"

"So what were you looking at?"

"Whatever you're wearing that keeps showing under your skirt. Is that a pair of Spanx?"

Her eyes widened right before a vivid red swept up her neck. She jerked at the skirt riding high on her thighs. "Oh, my God. I can't believe..."

She turned and stalked ahead of him, holding her purse as if it were the last parachute on a plane.

He followed not because he had to, but because something inside him wanted to follow her. Which didn't make a damn lick of sense.

CHAPTER FOUR

MALCOLM HENRY, JR. sat in his big office chair and smiled.

He couldn't have scripted a better meeting between his grandson and that adorable girl. Brennan had taken notice earlier than Malcolm had expected and it tickled him to no end. He was tired of watching a parade of beautiful empty girls wind through his grandson's life, and he wondered if this Mary Paige could work magic in the life of the person he held dearest.

Not that it had been his original intention—he wasn't a matchmaker and would never meddle in his grandson's love life. But when life handed you peaches, you made pie. And as he'd watched the pretty Mary Paige climb into his Bentley with such apprehension, he wondered if fate had pulled a fast one and delivered the very person who might help Brennan find the true meaning of Christmas.

Hell, the true meaning of life.

A real peach.

Malcolm sneezed and it scared the dog curled in his lap.

"Sorry, girl," he said, scratching under Izzy's chin. She closed her alert eyes and if a dog could sigh, well, then Izzy sighed. "Such a wonderful creature, aren't you?"

She didn't bother to open her eyes. That meant she agreed.

A knock at his office door had him spinning from the view of Poydras Street to face his assistant, Anton "Gator" Perot, who'd been his bodyguard, driver and right-hand man for the past twenty years. Malcolm trusted Gator like he trusted no other. Raised on the bayou backwaters by a grandmother from the Houma tribe, Gator had pulled himself up from near poverty by sheer cunning, guts and smarts. He'd landed in Malcolm's doorway after refusing to take a job with the Garciano family—a true show of character that paid off when Al Garciano was tossed in the slammer for racketeering.

"I have the pictures from last night on this disk," Gator said, setting a plastic case on Malcolm's desk. "Want me to give them to Ellen or send them to the Picayune?"

Malcolm sighed. "Not yet. I'm still waiting to see if Miss Gentry will sign on."

His assistant raised his eyebrows as he eased into one of the red leather chairs across from Malcolm. "She did look at the check, didn't she? Two million's hard to say no to. Don't think I've met a broad who would turn down shoe money like that."

"This one's a bit different."

"Do-gooders usually are."

"Is that what you think she is? A do-gooder?"

Gator shrugged. "Never would have pinned you for one, either, but turns out you shoulda named that mutt Max."

"Max? Izzy's a girl."

"You know from that cartoon about the Grinch. Remember his dog's named Max."

The Grinch, huh? Well, Malcolm supposed it could be said his old shriveled heart had grown three sizes. Or, more accurately, it had repaired itself with a new mission in life.

Six months, three weeks and four days ago, Malcolm had stepped out of the Bentley, heading into the board-of-directors meeting, when a crippling pain struck him. He'd literally dropped to his knees, putting out a hand to a passerby who sidestepped him in panic. Gator had already pulled away from the curb, and there was no one there to help him. He collapsed on the dirty Poydras sidewalk, unable to talk or even breathe.

Someone had called 911 and a doctor dining in a hotel restaurant had seen him from across the street, left his eggs Benedict and administered first aid. By the time Malcolm had reached the

hospital, he'd coded twice. The E.R. doctor was on record as stating there wasn't a prayer's chance in hell Malcolm would make it.

After a drawn-out surgery where he was nearly declared dead, Malcolm had awoken alone in ICU...and had remained there by himself for four days. When he'd been moved to a private room, he went a whole week seeing no one but his physical therapist, the doctors, nurses and Gator. Brennan had come by once to get him to sign power-of-attorney papers so he could run the company while Malcolm recovered.

Malcolm had received tons of flowers, plants and baskets of cookies, but no visitors.

And that had done something to him.

The reality of being Malcolm Henry, Jr., CEO of MBH, had slammed into him with the same crippling velocity of a massive heart attack. He was a shadow of a man who no one knew and, worse, no one really cared about.

And the realization had hurt.

And it had sobered.

And it had changed him.

As he worked to heal himself physically—changing his eating habits, work habits and exercise habits—he'd looked really hard at his life and what it represented and found it sadly lacking in the fundamentals of happiness.

He had no family who cared for him, save Brennan, who was headed down the same dead-end street Malcolm had already trod, and Ellen, who was focused on healing from a bitter divorce. His only other kin, his nephew Asher, lived in Europe and seldom visited. Malcolm had no true peace. No true purpose other than making money. No warmth of human kindness to buffet him when a cold wind blew. His life was a yawning pit of darkness with no light beckoning.

Malcolm needed a role model, someone to show him what true joy was. So he went to the bookstore and bought biographies on people who'd embodied it—Mother Teresa, Ghandi and the Apostle Paul. He read about their lives of service, about their lack of self-importance, about their sheer passion for living.

And his heart had grown three sizes.

"Maybe I should have named her Max," he said, rubbing her head and earning an adoring swipe of her tongue on his wrist. "I sent Brennan with Miss Gentry for a coffee. Right now, they don't see eye to eye on this endeavor."

Gator raised his eyebrows, making his thin, nearly feral face more attractive. He looked fierce but was putty in the hands of old ladies, small children and cats. Who woulda thunk?

"Brennan is a tough cookie, boss. He might eat Miss Gentry for lunch and pick his teeth with her pinky finger."

Malcolm smiled.

"What?" Gator grinned, a sort of dawning in his eyes. "You're not playing matchmaker, are you? She's not his type. He likes women who scratch."

"I have a sneaking suspicion Miss Mary Paige isn't as docile as she appears. She reminds me of a girl I once knew. And this isn't about matchmaking. It's more like waking Brennan from his money-drunk stupor."

Before it could take root, he struck the thought of Grace from his mind because it still smarted to think about his first love. She'd broken his heart and danced away with some schmuck from River Ridge after Malcolm had offered to set her up as his mistress. Who could blame her for wanting a full and respectable life, for refusing a man who would marry the "right" kind of girl while keeping the "wrong" one on speed dial? Malcolm had been too afraid of his father to choose Grace over adding to the family fortune as expected, so he'd lost her. And Malcolm hated losing.

“Well, let’s hope they find some way to make this happen. Don’t think you have time to play Hobo Hal again, and truthfully, I don’t wanna sit in that Dumpster again. Got a sensitive nose, and I still can’t get rid of the scent of rotten milk and molding bread.”

“Pansy-ass,” Malcolm drawled, spinning toward the window and the busy city cranking like gears on a clock spread before him.

“Managing mama hen,” Gator said.

Malcolm had to think about that. “Oh, I don’t have to do any managing of those two. I’m banking on something wonderful happening this Christmas.”

Gator harrumphed.

“Besides Brennan knows the score. He wants to be CEO. I want Mary Paige as my Spirit of Christmas. He better make it happen.”

“And you always get what you want.”

Malcolm smiled. “Usually.”

* * *

MARY PAIGE SCOOTED to one side of the elevator and pretended that she hadn’t made a fool of herself.

Of course, he had been looking at her stupid Spanx and not her butt. It was very evident the man wasn’t interested in someone like her. She’d seen his preferred type of woman earlier and Mary Paige was as far from put-together sophistication as a gal could get.

Not that she didn’t try.

She wanted to be a confident, well-dressed career girl. To have a duplex uptown, shop in decent stores and get her hair cut in salons that offered tea while she waited.

But she hadn’t gotten there yet. And she may never arrive at that particular destination if she let herself get sidetracked.

“I’m assuming you like coffee since my grandfather has sent us out on a playdate for the stuff?” Brennan asked, shrugging into his overcoat as the elevator descended. An older woman with puffy graying hair had handed it to him as they’d approached the lobby of MBH, making Mary Paige wonder how the woman had known he needed the coat. Psychic assistant?

“Uh, sure. Though I usually go for tea.”

“They have tea.”

And that was their brilliant conversation in the elevator.

They walked out of the building, greeted by a cold wind whipping around the corner. Mary Paige shivered and wished she hadn’t left her sweater behind that morning. Brennan quickly took off his coat and handed it to her.

“No, I’m fine. It’s a short walk.”

He jabbed it toward her again. “I insist.”

She tried not to sigh her frustration. He was already acting as though he had to babysit her. She didn’t need his damn coat because it wasn’t like they were in Minnesota. It was only forty-three degrees—she wouldn’t freeze walking three doors down. But she took the dark cashmere coat and draped it over her shoulders.

It was warm and smelled like expensive men’s cologne and for a brief moment, she felt safer.

Which was idiotic.

“Thank you. You’re quite the gentleman.”

He looked at her and stuck his hands into his pants pockets. “I try.”

Monday morning in New Orleans swirled around them with businessmen hurrying toward offices, tourists sleepily contemplating maps and street signs and the French Quarter homeless folks lolling in doorways, siphoning heat from open souvenir shops.

CC's smelled like her mama's kitchen, resplendent with the scents of comforting coffee and pound cake baking. Tinkling jazz was overshadowed by the hum of conversation and the hiss of the espresso machine.

She approached the counter and perused the menu board. She didn't usually go to coffeehouses for tea because the prices added up fast. She was an at-home Celestial Seasonings kind of girl. "I'll have a cup of green tea. That's it."

She pulled her wallet from her purse.

"I've got it," Brennan said.

"No, you do not," she said, shoving a five-dollar bill at the girl behind the register, who took it with an unsure look.

Brennan shrugged, ordered a plain black coffee then reclined in a chair at one of the wooden tables, crossing his legs and looking very intense even in a relaxed posture.

Mary Paige took the cup steaming with fragrance and sat opposite him. "So?"

He gave a smile that didn't reach his eyes. Kind of an annoyed smile. A make-the-best-of-this smile. "My grandfather has an iron will, if you haven't noticed."

"I noticed," she said, pulling the tea bag from the water and setting it on a pile of napkins. She added one sugar packet then took a sip. It warmed her instantly. "Oh, here's your coat. Thank you for letting me borrow it."

He waved a hand. "Keep it until we get back."

She nodded, mostly because it seemed stupid to argue over a coat when they had more important things to iron out. "About this whole Spirit deal, I get the feeling you're not on board with it, and I'm unsure exactly what it is I'm taking on and how I can do anything near what your grandfather wants."

Brennan nodded, pausing a moment as if he were gathering the right words to say. She studied him in the yellowish light of the café...at the slight shadow of his beard, the intelligent gray eyes and the thick shock of brown hair, glinting with reddish highlights. He had nice broad shoulders and strong, blunt fingers, and though he wore a well-tailored suit, she could tell he'd look spectacular in athletic shorts and a T-shirt.

Something more than tea warmed her insides.

Okay, horny girl. Stop fantasizing about Scrooge as a man and see him for what he is—a not-so-nice person.

But could she really say that?

No.

She didn't know the man, and judged him based only on his reaction to the crazy scheme his grandfather had dreamed up and his intent to make a buck from the campaign. That didn't mean Brennan threw kittens in the lake or elbowed old ladies.

"I agree with you. This whole thing is absurd, but my grandfather's nutty Spirit of Christmas idea isn't a bad one. It could be brilliant for our company, bring in a load of customers buying into the whole true-meaning crap. It's just bothersome to have to spend the time making it happen."

Okay, he was a bit of an ass.

"Bothersome?" she asked.

"Well, don't tell me you want to skip all over the city doing Lord only knows what for the entire season? With me?"

He looked hard at her and something crackled between them.

What if?

That question floated out there between them.

Mary Paige snatched it back. "So this is a no-go?"

"I didn't say that."

What had he said, then?

Mary Paige cleared her throat. “Listen, I have plans for my life. Plans that don’t include a crazy billionaire and five weeks of standing beside you pretending I want to be there.”

He frowned and looked sort of offended.

“But I like your grandfather. And I like what he’s trying to do. Christmas often feels so commercialized people lose sight of what is truly important.”

“Which is?”

“Family, friends, love.”

“Bah, humbug,” he said with a smile.

She arched an eyebrow she knew needed waxing. Why hadn’t she gone by the mall and attended to her wayward eyebrows? Because she hadn’t known she’d be sitting across from a hot executive having tea.

“I’m trying to bring some humor into this,” he said.

She rolled her eyes.

“Not working?”

She took another sip of tea. “You’re behaving much better.”

“Oh, goody.”

“If we do this, we need to set ground rules.”

“I know. You aren’t sleeping with me.”

She felt the blush sweep her face and wished she had more control of her body. “I’m sorry about that. I didn’t mean to—”

“So you will sleep with me?” His gray eyes sparked and for the first time she saw that Brennan’s charm might be way more deadly than expected. The man was downright gorgeous when he offered a genuine smile.

“Uh, that’s not what I meant. I meant I didn’t mean to imply that you were looking at my... uh...my butt in that way.”

“What if I were? You have a nice-looking ass.”

She snapped her mouth closed because it had fallen open again like the country bumpkin she was.

His eyes crinkled and she realized he enjoyed flirting with her. What’s worse, she enjoyed it, too. “Stop playing with me, Brennan.”

“Oh, I haven’t even begun playing with you yet, Mary Paige,” he drawled, his voice dropping an octave, making liquid heat flood her lower body.

Damn him. This man wasn’t anything she should be meddling with.

“Okay, are we doing this or not, Brennan?”

“Doing what?”

“This Spirit of Christmas thing your grandfather wants.”

“Oh, that.”

She didn’t bother with asking him what else he’d been talking about because she knew. And she wouldn’t give him the satisfaction he wanted. “Yes, that. The only thing on the menu.”

His short laugh stroked the imp inside her who really, really liked playing the sexy word games with him. “Actually, I usually prefer things not on the menu, but we’ll see about that, won’t we?”

“No.” She sipped her tea and stared out at people hurrying by the window. She wasn’t allowing herself to go off the menu...she was barely convinced by what was on the menu. Spending time with Brennan felt dangerous, and that appealed to her. Which was peculiar. She didn’t even like him all that much. “In all seriousness, should we do this thing your grandfather has in mind?”

“No,” he said, leaning back in the chair, taking a draw of the dark roast he’d purchased. “But my grandfather usually gets his way. He’s like that.”

“I’m thinking you’re both accustomed to getting your way,” she muttered.

His smile was almost predatory.

Yeah, dangerous.

“At first I thought the idea ludicrous, but the more I think about it the more I like differentiating our stores from the pack. It’s a good message for the holidays. A do-onto-others sort of vibe that seems right in this economy.”

“You’re back to thinking of it as a profit generator.”

He cocked his head. “I’m always thinking of the bottom line, Mary Paige. Always. I can’t apologize for doing my job. I want to be up front and honest here about the reason I’m considering throwing my hat into this promotion blitz—it’s good for the company. And that’s it.”

She nodded, not happy that his only motivation for standing beside her as she became the Spirit of Christmas for Henry Department Stores was money, but appreciating his honesty. It was disappointing a person would be self-serving in the opportunity to help others and revel in the joy of the season. Very sad.

“Okay, I’ll sign on as long as you promise to be a good boy.”

He shrugged. “Who, me?”

She nodded, a bit amazed she was giving directives to a Henry. It was probably the most power she’d held in her hand ever...which felt heady. “Yes, you. I can’t have someone standing beside me scaring the homeless with a frowny face as I serve them Christmas ham.”

“We’re serving ham to the homeless?”

“I don’t know, but whatever Ellen and Mr. Henry have planned for us may put you outside your comfort zone. I’ll be your Spirit of Christmas as long as you summon a little enthusiasm.”

“I can fake merry.”

“That’s really pathetic, but I’ll take that as a yes.”

He extended his hand across the table and she stared at it for a brief second.

Did she really want to commit to spending the next few weeks with this man?

Her brother’s sloppy grin popped into her head, followed closely by her mother’s expression when faced with the mound of bills on the counter.

And then her own towering student loans.

And the animal shelter three streets away from her rented duplex in desperate need of funding.

Yeah, she could suffer through Scrooge for the next month. It wouldn’t be bad. He’d be her shadow. Nothing more. And at the end of it all, she’d take that check and create good with it.

She took his hand, which was warm from the coffee, and tried to ignore how nice it felt as his fingers curled over hers. No stupid tingles or dumb electricity. Just a nice toasty shake that made her feel only slightly fluttery. “Deal.”

He pulled his hand away and stood. “I need to get back. I have a luncheon meeting in thirty minutes, and I’m sure Grandfather will want to go over particulars with you. I’ll let him know we’re in on this Spirit of Christmas.”

She rose, dropped her half-filled cup in the trash can and followed him out the door—which he held for her, of course. As they walked to his office building, she mulled over her decision to do this thing. Was she borrowing trouble? Probably. She didn’t want to acknowledge it, but an attraction to Brennan lurked at the edge of her consciousness. That’s why agreeing to Malcolm Henry, Jr.’s plan felt dangerous. Because of Brennan and the way she kept looking at his stormy gray eyes, his drool-worthy shoulders and the nice butt that peeked through the back slit of his suit jacket.

But she’s wouldn’t be one of his playthings. Oh, she knew his reputation—New Orleans’s own playboy, favorite of the jet-setters and a cousin to those alpha heroes in her mother’s British romance books.

Of course he wasn’t some emotionally stunted Greek tycoon. He was an emotionally stunted New Orleans tycoon.

Surely there was a difference.

And she wasn’t his secretary...or mistress...or nurse.

Mary Paige was her mother's daughter, Caleb's sister, future CPA and card-carrying member of the SPCA and about as far from Brennan Henry's type as a gal could get.

And that was her only reassurance.

They walked into the lobby of the building and she watched Brennan cringe at the large tree near the fountain. The music spilling out was jolly and reminded them of how cold it was outside.

Brennan gave another disgusted glance at the tree flashing in tune and turned to her. "When you get the schedule for whatever they're planning, will you insure Grandfather forwards it to me so I can sync my calendar? He's forgetful in his old age."

"Sure," she said, shrugging out of his coat, inhaling the scent of his cologne as she surrendered the warmth. "Anything else, master?"

She was being a smart-ass, but didn't care. She wasn't his assistant and didn't have to pass along messages for him. Okay, it wasn't hard to utter a simple sentence, but still, his presumptuousness irked her.

His eyes glinted approval at her sarcasm, which had a peculiar effect on her stomach. He pointed to the tree. "Yeah, tell him to take down that blinking monstrosity. It's offensive."

Mary Paige studied the good-looking miser who seemed to have tumbled from Dickens's book into the here and now. "Tell him yourself."

CHAPTER FIVE

MARY PAIGE OPENED the door to her duplex in midtown and smelled something burning. Simon must have made himself dinner because her place always smelled like this when Simon cooked. She also knew the dirty dishes would be in the sink and he'd be gone. Wonderful houseguest, he ain't.

"Simon?"

His head poked out of the kitchen. "Oh, you're home early."

A giggle from the kitchen proved she'd been off base about what Simon had been doing in the kitchen.

"I took the day off," Mary Paige said, zipping her purse and setting it on the table in the narrow foyer and trying to gauge whether she should leave or blaze into the kitchen and kick her goat of an ex-boyfriend out of her life for good.

"Uh, Mary Paige, I kinda have a friend here," Simon said, jerking his head toward the depths of her tiny kitchen.

"I heard, but I need a drink," she said, heading toward the fridge where, hopefully, she'd still find her dime-store bottle of Zinfandel.

"Stop," Simon said, flinging out a hand. "We're not exactly decent."

Mary Paige almost skidded into the sofa table she stopped so fast. Oh, heck to the no. He better not be naked with some floozy in her kitchen.

Disgusting.

"Simon, please tell me you're not—"

"We're doing some experimental art. That's all," he said with the shrug of a thin naked shoulder.

"Fun experimental art," someone of the female persuasion called out with a slight giggle.

"Okay, fine. I'll go to my room for a moment while you two get decent and clear out of my place. Both of you. Clear out." Mary Paige hurried toward her room because though she'd seen Simon without clothes, she never planned on doing so again. Letting him crash here had been a favor...one that had long ago proven a huge mistake.

Because she couldn't get him off her couch or—obviously—out of her kitchen.

But she'd reached the end of her charity.

"Okay, we're good," Simon called after Mary Paige studied the wonder of her new cherry sleigh bed covered by a cream batiste spread. She'd looked hard at it, making sure Simon and whoever was posing for his experimental art—aka sex in the kitchen—hadn't tried to use her new bed.

She stalked out to find Simon slouching on her couch wearing a pair of sweatpants and tank top. His bare feet were propped on her new Glamour magazine, and the bimbo—Mary Paige recognized her as the girl who sold her fancy cookies at a bakery down the street—perched on the corner of the couch. Her hair fell around her shoulders in a sort of dirty-looking dreadlock do that wasn't flattering and hadn't been in style for ten years.

"What's up, M.P.?" Simon said, folding his arms behind his head and giving her a quasi-smile.

"What is up is your time," Mary Paige said, nudging his bare feet off her table with her knee. "You said you only needed to crash here for a few days, and it's turned into almost a month. This little escapade was the last straw. You need to pack your stuff and leave."

"Come on, M.P. As soon as Rick gives me that commission, I'll get a place."

"No. My couch hasn't been my own for too long and I miss it. Go stay with her." Mary Paige pointed to the cookie girl, who made a funny face.

"He can't stay with me. I live with my boyfriend."

Right. Of course she did.

"Babe, if you'd let me sleep with you, I wouldn't be out here on this couch." Simon spread his hands and tried to give her his little-lost-boy smile, the one she'd fallen for over a year ago—before she knew that her highly artistic, creative boyfriend was a slug in disguise. He'd milked her checking account while bleeding her heart dry. And she found out she wasn't so into a carefree, bohemian lifestyle when he asked if she was up for a three-way.

She'd ended the relationship last spring and hadn't seen him until almost a month ago when he'd shown up at her front door with a hangdog expression and a pretty good reason why he'd cheated on her before—he had a large sexual appetite she couldn't handle, which meant he'd actually been doing her a favor, right? Mary Paige had been caught so off guard by his tale of woe regarding some scheme a gallery owner had pulled on him, she'd agreed to let him sleep on her couch for a few days.

Yeah, she was a dumb-ass that way.

Not only that, but she owned all those Dead Sea salt scrubs and lotions sold in kiosks in the mall.

Giant sucker.

But not today.

"Get out of my apartment and take the cookie girl with you. Now." Mary Paige stomped her foot. Twice.

"Babe, just a few more days. I swear. Rick's a man of his word and he'll get me my money."

"And I'm a woman of mine. I told you that you could stay here for a few days...a month ago. Now it's time to find some other sucker to mooch off. And you better leave the forty bucks you took out of my purse on the table before you leave. Oh, and the extra key."

Simon straightened. "I didn't take your forty bucks. I borrowed it."

"Well, I want my borrowed money back or I'll walk my butt down to the police station on the corner and file charges."

He threw his hands up. "Whatever. I'll write you a check."

Not even worth the paper it was written on, no doubt. But it was better than nothing. "Fine."

"Don't know why you're busting my ass for forty bucks when you got a two-million-dollar check squirreled away." He gave her a little-boy smile aimed at making her feel crummy for holding out on him. "Naughty little M.P."

His guilt trip didn't work.

"You went through my jewelry box?" Mary Paige curled her hands and parked them on her hips so she wouldn't wrap them around Simon's scrawny neck. What had she ever seen in him? Okay, he was cute in a starving artist, funky, unconventional way, but that was where the charm ended.

Cookie Dreadlocks's eyes widened. "She's got a check for a cool two mil?"

"Looks real," Simon said, stretching before glancing at the girl he'd more than likely bopped on Mary Paige's grandmother's vintage table. "Is it real?"

Mary Paige glared at him. “Of course not. Why would I have a check for that much lying around for you to find? It was a joke gift from my uncle’s party.”

The doorbell dinged like the bell in a boxing match.

Sweet relief.

“I’ll get it,” Cookie Dreadlocks chirped as she skipped to the door.

“This isn’t your—” The door swung open to reveal Brennan Henry standing on Mary Paige’s stoop.

“Yo, lookie,” Cookie Dreadlocks said, glancing over her shoulder at Mary Paige. “You got money in your doorway.”

Brennan slid off his sunglasses and glanced at the brass numbers affixed to the weathered exterior boards.

“Fake check, huh? Yeah, I know who that is.” Simon pointed toward Brennan. “Saw him at a show once.”

Mary Paige had no clue what to do when a hot, rich guy showed up on her stoop in the middle of kicking Sir Simon the Leech and his consort from her life, so she took a good thirty seconds to think about it.

Why now? Why here? Why her?

No answers.

“Oh, wow, is that your ride on the curb, dude?” Cookie Dreadlocks asked.

“Um, yeah,” Brennan said.

“Goddamn, that’s a good lookin’ car.” Simon checked out the ride through the slotted blinds.

Mary Paige finally snapped out of it when she saw Simon sliding toward the door with an opportunistic gleam in his green eyes. She pushed skinny Simon against the couch and stepped in front of Cookie Dreadlocks then she squeezed out the door, shutting it behind her.

“Mr. Henry,” she said, glad she hadn’t already changed into her usual end-of-the-day sweats and fluffy socks. “What are you doing here?”

He stepped back, nearly falling off the postage-stamp-size stoop. “Uh, I had to come this way for an appointment and thought I’d bring over the contract and schedule Grandfather and Ellen put together. Got my hands on it right before I left the office and thought you might want to look at it before you sign since there are some negotiable areas with regard to appearances.”

Mary Paige caught a flutter at the window and knew Simon was spying on them. She almost shushed Brennan. “Oh, okay.”

Brennan turned as the curtain was drawn back. “Who’s that?”

“Who’s who?”

“That guy staring out at us. Is he your boyfriend?”

“No,” she said, holding firm to the doorknob and pretending that Simon and the weird girl didn’t exist.

Simon knocked on the window and waved.

So much for pretending Simon the Mooch away. She tried to smile.

“Well, he’s waving at us. And he’s in your place. This is your house, right?”

“I’m actually leasing it, but, yes, I live here,” she said, turning toward her ex-boyfriend. She shot poison arrows out of her eyes at him. Not for real, of course. But if she’d had the ability, she might have used it.

She hadn’t wanted Simon to know anything about the Henry Department Store thing.

Yet.

Of course, Simon would find out when he saw her in the media, but she really wanted to get him out of her life—and off her couch—before he learned she’d become the centerpiece of a multimillion-dollar campaign. Who wanted the headache of Simon and his puppy-dog eyes and sad-sack stories of someone ripping him off facing her every time she turned around? Oh, and his palm out, too.

“So?”

She glanced at Brennan, who seemed out of place against the sagging rail of her porch steps and the scraggly grass creeping over the cracked sidewalk. Mr. Ledbetter, the guy who owned the duplex, had had surgery and hadn't been able to do any repairs, much less weed eating. The whole neighborhood still showed the effects of Katrina like a dry-rotted badge. So Brennan standing akimbo in his charcoal cashmere coat, dark pants and shiny shoes looked like a prince who'd stumbled upon a broken-down duplex in a questionable area of midtown to save the poor, clueless wench.

Well, she wasn't a wench or clueless.

But still he looked awfully yummy for a gripe-ass.

“He's leaving. Now,” she said loud enough for Simon to hear. The curtains swished closed and she sighed. “He's been staying with me for a few weeks. Uh, just as a friend, but he's worn out his welcome today. Kind of an inopportune time, you know?”

Brennan's eyes widened and he shoved his sunglasses into the coat pocket. “You were kicking him out?”

“Not that it's really any of your business, but, yes, he's leaving,” she said again loudly, to emphasize the point.

One of his dark eyebrows lifted and a smile played at his lips. “You're fired up, aren't you?”

“That amuses you?” she asked, pushing her hair behind her ear and trying for some inner control. She needed to get Brennan off her stoop and Cookie Dreadlocks and Simon out of her house, and then eat a Lean Cuisine dinner. In exactly that order. “Now, if you'll hand me the contract and schedule?”

Brennan didn't budge. Just stared hard at the window where the curtains had started fluttering again. “You need some help convincing him?”

“No, I'm pretty sure he's going. For good.”

“I'm not convinced.”

“You don't have to be. I don't need your help.”

“I'm sure you do.” He beckoned at the window with one finger.

The doorknob wiggled in her hand. She clamped down on it, but even though she weighed the same as Simon, he had that whole manly arm-strength going for him. Brennan caught her before she stumbled into Simon.

“What's up?” Simon said, scratching his head and looking very much at home. He'd tossed away his standard slouch for some puffed-up chest posturing.

“You giving Mary Paige a hard time?” Brennan folded his arms across his chest, which seemed to poke holes in Simon's defensive pose. Mary Paige could almost hear the strains of the theme song from *High Noon* in the late-afternoon chill.

“Why would I give her a hard time?” Simon shrugged.

“She said you're leaving. You've worn out your welcome with her.”

Simon shrugged again. “Mary Paige got a little ruffled, but that's Mary Paige for you. A sweetheart of a girl. She didn't mean—”

“The hell I didn't.” She poked Simon in the chest. “I want you and Cookie out.”

“My name is Chloe,” the girl chirped, peeking over Simon's shoulder. “I really don't like being called ‘Cookie’ just because I sell cookies. I sell donuts, too. And lemon squares. And I'm studying to be a social worker.”

Mary Paige felt a flash of guilt. Hadn't been fair of her to lump Chloe into the same pile as Simon—the girl had ambition. “Sorry, Chloe, but I really do wish you and your new boyfriend would vacate my apartment. I'm tired and want a bath.”

“No prob,” Chloe said, sliding by them all and trotting down the steps, backpack swinging behind her. “Later, Simon, who is not my boyfriend.”

“Later,” Simon said, failing to move from the threshold.

“Now it’s your turn,” Brennan said in a growly voice, eyeballing Simon like something he’d found on the bottom of his shoe.

Simon gave Brennan his own version of a withering look. “Who are you to tell me anything? Don’t remember your name on the lease of this apartment.”

“Come on, Simon, it really is time to move on. After the whole deal with the money and then this episode today in the kitchen, I think we’re really done here,” Mary Paige said, in the same voice she used when she had to milk Betty Ann, her mother’s Jersey cow. Betty Ann was a cow version of bitch supreme and kicked hard.

“Are you doing this guy, M.P.? Is that what this is? ’Cause now it makes sense why you wouldn’t let me connect the dots.” Simon drew a line from one of his nipples to the other.

Brennan moved as quick as a cat—a pissed-off jungle cat—and twisted a fist in Simon’s T-shirt. “She said get out.”

His words were low and lethal. Mary Paige could almost imagine her grumpy Scrooge as a supersecret spy...or simply a guy who had a personal trainer. Fear flashed in Simon’s eyes before he threw up his hands. “Kay, dude. Lay off the testosterone next time.”

Brennan released Simon, who immediately slunk inside her apartment, tossing Brennan his own fierce look. She clasped her hands behind her back, unsure whether she should thank Brennan or fuss at him for manhandling Simon. “Uh, thanks for being so insistent.”

Brennan ran his hands down his coat and tilted his head toward her. “Are you going to ask me in?”

She thought about that. “Do you want to come in?”

“Don’t mind if I do,” he said stepping into her world like a man who owned every room he entered—as a Henry, that probably happened often. The Henry family owned plenty of yard all over the Crescent City.

She followed him and shut the door only because it was still abnormally cold and the sun had gone to bed early. Otherwise, she might have left it open so as not to shut herself inside with two men who made her nervous. Simon shoved clothes into an old duffel while muttering under his breath. Brennan monitored him like a prison warden. As if he expected Simon to pull something funny. Which was weird considering Brennan had no idea what belonged to her or what belonged to Simon. It was moot, but she figured Simon didn’t know that.

“I’ll grab your stuff from the bathroom,” Mary Paige said, trying to escape the drama by giving her hands something to do.

“Already got it,” Simon said, tossing deodorant and body spray into the bag with the velocity of a major-league pitcher. He zipped the bag with angry flourish. Mary Paige handed him the bag that held his camera and various photography supplies, and he jerked it from her hand.

“Well, guess I’ll see you later, Simon,” Mary Paige said, feeling a little ping of regret at the circumstances of his leaving. No. She shouldn’t feel that way. That’s what got her in this mess in the first place. She had to stop picking up strays and getting walked on by everyone in her world... especially guys like Simon.

“Yeah, whatever,” he grumbled as he dashed a go-to-hell look at Brennan and headed for the door. The slam literally shook the house and a picture Caleb had painted for her fell off the wall.

“Well, that was fun,” Brennan said, picking the bright attempt at postmodernism from the old mismatched chair into which it had thankfully fallen.

He studied the childish rendering that she was proud of, given how difficult art was for Caleb with his cerebral palsy, before setting it against the end table.

“So why are you really here?” Mary Paige said.

* * *

WHY WAS HE HERE?

Brennan really didn't have a good answer. He'd used the contract as an excuse to see her again, and he had no clue why he even wanted to see her again. Hell, Creighton was probably at his place now reclining against his headboard wearing a racy thong and sipping a martini... which wasn't comforting in the least since he didn't want her there.

But really, why was he here with Merry Sunshine?

He hadn't the foggiest.

Maybe it was the idea of Creighton that had him detouring toward the shabby neighborhood harboring weird people like the two who'd just left, along with several stray dogs. He'd nearly hit one out front, and he hadn't missed the food bowls hidden under the scraggly azaleas. He'd be willing to bet Mary Paige fed the strays. Very irresponsible.

Creighton and her dog-eared copy of *Bride* magazine fled to the back of his mind as he contemplated the woman in front of him. Mary Paige looked at him expectantly before picking up a small fob and pressing it.

The Christmas tree in the corner came to life in brilliant color.

He knew it. She was a Christmas nutso.

"I came to give you the contracts," he said.

"Why not send them with a courier? Or fax them to my office? Or send them via email?"

He didn't have a good response. "I told you. I had a meeting this way and thought I'd save time."

"You mean spy on me," she said, dropping the remote on the table and kicking off her shoes. Her skirt still inched up her thighs but he didn't see the girdle thing peeking out. For some reason he wanted to see it. Maybe he had a girdle fetish he didn't know about. Or maybe he hadn't had enough water today. Didn't dehydration make a guy do dumb stuff like drive across town to see a clumsy blonde with a too-big bottom?

Or maybe it was something more than that? Not something he wanted to contemplate.

"I'm not spying on you. That's ridiculous." He shifted his weight and averted his gaze. Mostly because she was right. He'd been curious. "Though I have to say seeing you in your world makes things clearer."

Her brow creased and her pretty eyes narrowed. "Clearer?"

"Suffice it to say, I understand you better."

"Suffice'?"

"Am I not being articulate enough for you?"

"You haven't convinced me you aren't here to snoop around. So did you see what you needed?"

She swept her hand around dramatically. "It's not much but it's clean... or it will be as soon as I clear out all traces of Simon."

"It wasn't a bad idea for me to stop by. I helped you with Simon, didn't I?"

"Yeah, but I wouldn't nominate myself for Prince Charming just yet, if I were you. I've seen you in your world, too, you know." She walked toward the kitchen. "Would you like a cup of tea or a glass of wine?"

Drinking wine with her sounded intriguing, but he shouldn't. This wasn't a social visit. "Wine would be good."

"All I have is pink Zinfandel," she called from the kitchen.

Ugh. "That will be fine."

She returned moments later with a plastic wineglass full of pink liquid and gestured to her couch. "All I have are plastic—the cat kept knocking the glass ones off the table and breaking them. I got tired of picking slivers out of my toes."

A vision of Mary Paige's naked toes flashed in his mind. Good God, he really was in trouble. "Cat?"

“Well, there are a lot in this neighborhood that run wild. I’m not irresponsible and I’ve called animal control many times, but it’s a losing battle for them. I kept one little cat. She’s blind, thus the broken dishes.”

“Where is she?” He sat but not before checking for cat hair. He didn’t much care for dogs, cats or any other absurd pets like ferrets, parrots or gerbils.

“Under my bed, most likely. She hates Simon.”

“Good judge of character.”

Mary Paige smiled and something inside him warmed. Her face had a sort of glow...or maybe it was that absurd tinsel Christmas tree beyond her shoulder. “My relationship with Simon was as much my fault as his. I enable people because I’m too soft. My greatest weakness.”

“A weakness that brought you fortune.”

“Fortune isn’t everything.” Her eyes appeared as deep as any lake he’d ever dived into during all those years of summer camp. She believed what she said.

Huh.

Maybe that was the reason for his fascination with her—she didn’t seem to care about money, unfathomable as it seemed. Anyone else faced with a dangling carrot of two million dollars would tap-dance, stand on his head or eat worms, but this woman didn’t give a rat’s ass. Money truly meant little to her.

Maybe she was soft...in the head.

But he knew that wasn’t true. Oh, she was soft all right—from the lovely curve of her ass to the goose-down heart beneath that ill-fitting, bright pink sweater. And that had to be the other part of his attraction to her—the softness that was so opposite of most of the women in his life, with their sharp cheekbones and even sharper tongues. “Not your fault for being decent, but I wouldn’t have let him in the door in the first place.”

“You wouldn’t have, would you?”

He took a sip of wine and tried not to grimace at the sweetness. “Nope.”

“So did you do enough reconnaissance? Satisfied I won’t wreck your company’s image with a heroin problem or bipolar personality?”

“No, you’re surprisingly consistent.”

He took a big gulp of the wine, grimaced because he couldn’t help himself this time, and stood. “I should be going. Here’s the contract and schedule. We’re moving fast out of the gate with the lighting of the Henry’s Christmas tree downtown on Wednesday evening. We’ll meet at the Fern and St. Charles stop to take the streetcar there. Work for you?”

“That soon?”

“My grandfather will work you like a mule.”

“He wants his money’s worth.” She gave another pretty smile. “I’ve yet to talk to Ivan the Terrible, but I’ll break the news tomorrow.”

“Ivan the Terrible?”

“My boss.” She followed him toward the door. “He reminds me of you—all business, no charm.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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