



Silhouette®

1556
November

Her Mistletoe Man

CAROLYN GREENE

Romance®
SILHOUETTE



Carolyn Greene

Her Mistletoe Man

Аннотация

ALL HE WANTED FOR CHRISTMAS... was to get away from the hustle and bustle of another lonely holiday season. But when Tucker Maddock stopped at what he thought was a quaint country inn, he found himself at a reunion of the big, boisterous Marsh family—who instantly welcomed their "long-lost cousin" with open arms....It was tempting to pretend, just for a little while, that this close, loving family was his own. But there was one small problem—a woman named Ruth Marsh. She was suspicious of him from the start—and so beautiful, he definitely didn't want her to think they were related!And suddenly Tucker could think of something he'd really like to unwrap come Christmas morning....

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“The first Christmas kiss of the season is good luck,” Tucker said, pointing to the cluster of greenery that dangled above them.

“Really?” Ruth said doubtfully. “I never heard of that tradition.”

“Neither did I,” he admitted. “I just made it up.”

He touched his mouth to hers then, the movement brief yet decisive. And more than a little pleasurable.

When their lips parted, she met his gaze. Her clear, golden-brown eyes appeared to be smiling, as if she had enjoyed the kiss as much as he had.

The first Christmas kiss under the mistletoe. As far as he was concerned, it was indeed a lucky kiss.

He lifted his head to thank his lucky stars—and the little green ball of leaves that dangled over their heads.

“Oops, I was mistaken,” he told her without a hint of remorse. “That’s not mistletoe...it’s holly.”

Her Mistletoe Man

Carolyn Greene



www.millsandboon.co.uk

To my agent, Ruth Kagle, who is beautiful on the inside as well as the outside. Thanks for believing in me.

Books by Carolyn Greene

Silhouette Romance

An Eligible Bachelor #1503

Her Mistletoe Man # 1556

Previously Published as Carolyn Monroe:

Silhouette Romance

Kiss of Bliss #847

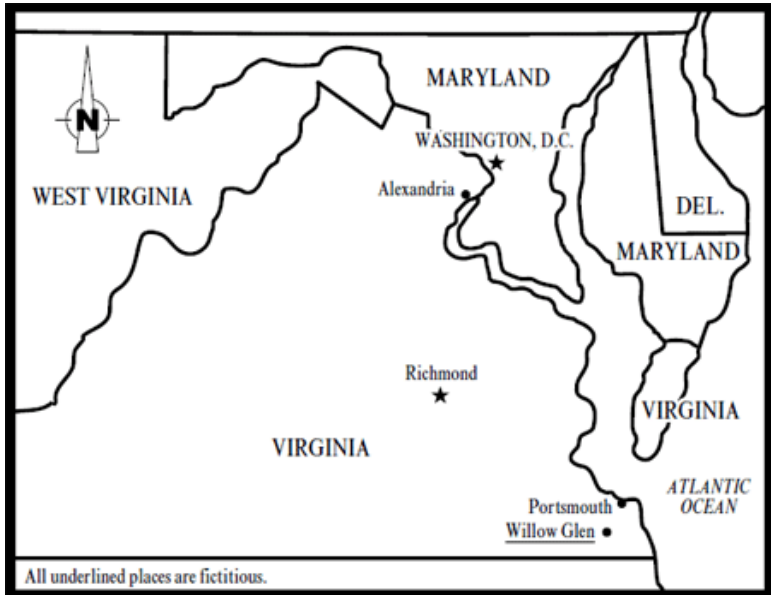
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Help Wanted: Daddy #970

CAROLYN GREENE

has been married to a fire chief for more than twenty years. She laughingly introduces herself as the one who lights the fires and her husband as the one who puts them out. They are a true opposites-attract type of couple and, because of this, they and their two teenagers have learned a lot about the art of compromise.

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Prologue

The flashing neon light from the sign outside Tucker Maddock's Alexandria, Virginia, office window seemed to assault him in one-second intervals with its disgustingly cheery message.

Merry Christmas. Merry Christmas. Merry Christmas.

Yeah, right. He hadn't had a merry Christmas since... well, there was no need rehashing all the losses he'd endured during what was supposed to be the happiest season of the year. The overtime work did little to ease the discomfort that gripped him lately. As a corporate executive, he was one of the best decision-makers in the business. His troubleshooting skills frequently attracted the attention of corporate headhunters who regularly approached him with employment offers at competing companies. He only wished he could clear away the troubles in his own life as effectively as he did on the job.

Last year had dealt him the final and most difficult holiday blow when a Christmas Eve tragedy had taken the lives of Chris, his best friend, and Chris's parents. They'd been like his own family. And now he missed them. Wanted to be close to them. Wanted to fill the aching, gaping hole in his spirit with their memory.

Tucker stood and began clearing his desk. The flashing sign filled the semidarkened room with its alternating green-and-red

eerie glow. The light seemed to pulsate within him, filling his mind and soul with its unwanted message. Filling his heart with an insatiable urge to be with the loving family who had opened their hearts and home to him.

The heck with this. If he couldn't be with them, he could at least return to the place that held their memory. Tucker dashed off a note to his secretary, then opened a drawer and swept his forearm across the surface of the desk, effectively clearing it of papers, folders and scribbled notes. He would sort them out when he got back. But right now, he couldn't bring himself to open another card, smile at another caroler or wallow in the home-and-hearth happiness that was supposed to pervade the season.

If he didn't get away from all the tinsel and glitter and glad tidings in the city, he was going to go crazy. And at times like this, he'd found it was best to follow his heart...follow it back home to Willow Glen.

Chapter One

He'd have to sleep somewhere. It might as well be here.

Willow Glen Plantation had seemed like a mansion to him the first time he had visited the massive house. It still impressed him with its sprawling front lawn, welcoming circular driveway, broad veranda, cheerful turrets and dormer windows. After spending the happiest times of his life here from age ten until college, Tucker had been devastated when Chris's parents sold the place shortly after he and his friend went off to college. Will Carlton, the county's antiques dealer, had done some minor remodeling on the home and turned it into a charming bed-and-breakfast inn.

An elderly gentleman, apparently just returning home from a Christmas shopping excursion, went in ahead of him and held the door for Tucker to follow him.

"If I were you, son, I wouldn't wait out here too long. Dinner will be served soon, and believe me, you don't want to miss it."

Inside, garlands and running cedar were strewn from every conceivable surface: the front desk, the mahogany banister rail that led upstairs, even the chandelier that hung from the parlor ceiling.

Although modern fixtures and a front desk, complete with an antique cash register, had been added, the place hadn't changed much over the years. It even smelled the same, like cranberries and pine and...what was that other smell? Tucker set his duffel

bag down beside the curved-wood desk and closed his eyes while he inhaled the scent. In his mind, he could almost see Chris and Mr. and Mrs. Newland. He'd spent so much time in this house, sleeping here more than he'd slept at home, that he had become part of the family—so much a member of the family, in fact, that the elder Newlands had assigned him chores to perform. One Saturday a month, he and Chris were handed soft rags and a bottle of furniture polish to rub on the furniture, the banister and any other exposed wood, which constituted almost half the house.

He opened his eyes. That was the scent. Furniture polish. Maybe even the same brand.

An older woman, possibly more ancient than the gentleman who'd preceded him in, approached them. "Oren, dear," she said, addressing the other guest, "it's so good to see you again." She kissed his cheek, leaving a peach lip print on the gray stubble. Nodding toward the parlor where a group of guests had gathered, she added, "Your wife has been anxiously waiting for you."

The old man picked up his shopping bag and moved to join his wife.

Must be a regular, Tucker thought. The lady of the lip prints fixed her attention on him, scrutinizing him from head to toe and back again. "Well, aren't you a fine-looking young man. I'm Aunt Shirley," she declared.

That was a strange way to greet a guest, but he attributed the overfamiliarity to her advanced age. He gave her a warm smile.

“Tucker Maddock, ma’am. I was hoping you’d have room at the inn for one more.”

Aunt Shirley opened her mouth and laughed, the infectious sound attracting the attention of the people in the parlor. “He wants to know if we have room at the inn,” she told them. They seemed to find it funny as well and laughed among themselves. One woman, a dark-haired beauty who appeared to be in her mid-twenties, caught his eye as she sat threading popcorn onto a string. Apparently feeling the heat of his perusal, she looked up. As they gazed openly at each other, Tucker felt the room grow suddenly warmer. He loosened the collar of his jacket.

A teenage girl followed the brunette’s gaze and peered around the arched doorway at him. When she caught a glimpse of him, she blushed and drew back.

The brunette seemed to be studying him curiously from her overstuffed chair, as if he looked familiar to her but she couldn’t place his face. But Tucker was sure they’d never met. If they had, he most certainly would have remembered her.

Her legs were drawn up beneath her in the chair. Long, slim limbs encased in charcoal-gray fabric that coordinated with the bulky gray-green top that seemed to swallow her small features. Her dark hair spilled in disarray over the plush material, bringing to mind an image of her cuddled in bed under piles of blankets.

Her brown eyes slanted downward at the outer edges, making her look as though she’d just awakened from a long, luxurious sleep, and her lips seemed to be made for kissing.

Tucker involuntarily drew the back of his hand across his mouth.

She watched his idle gesture and her chin came forward, causing her pale pink mouth to pucker invitingly.

Ruth pushed a wild and wavy strand of hair away from her face. She'd been working hard to make this—possibly their last—Christmas family reunion the best one ever. And this latest arrival, though unexpected, certainly promised to make it one of their most interesting family gatherings. The way the stranger's gaze roamed over her made her feel almost intoxicated. She tried to still the crazy inner stirrings that made her feel decidedly light-headed.

Stop that! she commanded herself. It was sick to lust like this over a family member, no matter how distant the ties might be. No matter how tall and broad shouldered he might be. No matter how touchable his collar-length brown hair was or how his dark eyes seemed to penetrate right into her and read her very thoughts. Dragging her gaze away from him, she looked across the room at her sister. Vivian hadn't yet noticed the newest addition to their family reunion.

Ruth smiled and returned her attention to the handsome stranger. He smiled back. This was one hunk her older sister wouldn't snag. Unfortunately, he was off-limits to Ruth, as well.

She considered getting up and joining her aunt in greeting the family members who came here from throughout the state to attend their Christmas reunion, a regular event since they'd

bought the former hotel eight years ago. Though she'd grown up in Willow Glen, it wasn't until she'd moved into the old plantation house that she'd finally felt truly at home.

Aunt Shirley seemed to be holding her own. Now that the preliminary cleaning and cooking were done, she was in her element, reacquainting herself with family members from near and far.

Aunt Shirley turned back to Tucker. "You have such a wonderful sense of humor. Of course we have room. And we'd make room if we didn't."

"Uh, thank you, ma'am." He reached down and picked up his duffel bag. "If you'll point the way and give me a key, I'll just head on to my room."

"Call me Aunt Shirley. Everyone else does." She went behind the polished counter and refastened a paper Santa that adorned the wall. "As for keys, you don't need them here, honey. Nobody will mess with your stuff. Oren sleepwalks sometimes, but you can latch your door from the inside while you sleep."

Tucker frowned. He was familiar with mom-and-pop establishments, but this one beat all. However, room security shouldn't be a problem since he intended to be there the entire time. If the room didn't have a VCR, he could buy one and numb his brain with action-adventure movies for the holiday. Escape into the happiness of the past until the relentless false cheeriness of the season had subsided. As he faced his first Christmas alone, it would be just the medicine he needed to revisit the place that

had given him so many happy memories.

“Maddock,” Aunt Shirley said, rubbing the pale coral rouge from her left cheek. “I don’t seem to recall any Maddocks.”

Maybe she was asking if he’d been a guest at the inn before. Either that or she assumed—correctly—that he was from Willow Glen. In a town this small, everyone was either related by blood or marriage, or they went to school with one another. He wasn’t surprised she didn’t know his name. His parents weren’t originally from here, having come to Willow Glen shortly before he was born. After his mother died twenty-some years ago, his father drank all their money away and they’d lived on public assistance.

But he wasn’t going to tell Shirley all that. “I grew up not far from here,” he said. “I haven’t been back in more than ten years.”

The brunette narrowed her eyes at this revelation and joined them in the foyer. The older woman’s questions had seemed born of curiosity, but the younger one appeared somewhat skeptical.

“What are your mama and daddy’s first names?”

He chalked the question up to her being a true Southerner. Tucker knew that many Virginians could be obsessive about knowing a person’s lineage. So he humored her, glad for the opportunity to get a closer look at the lovely, gentle-eyed brunette as they spoke. “Helen and Bob.”

He loosened the top few snaps on his jacket.

Oddly, as if she weren’t aware of copying his action, she lifted her hand to the vee of her shirt. Tucker’s gaze followed

her movement and lingered on the dip in her throat. He didn't remember this house being so warm.

Tucker forced his attention back to Aunt Shirley. She pursed her bright peach-colored lips, making the lines around them form a miniature starburst pattern. "We have a Helen in our family, but I don't remember any Bobs. Was Bob your mama's second husband?"

"Huh?"

Oren called from the parlor. "Leave the boy alone, Shirley, and come in here so we can get this tree up."

"Okay, okay. Just hold on to your knickers."

Tucker shook his head, amazed by the easy familiarity the hotel staff had with most of the guests. He assumed some of the guests liked it here so much they had become regulars. It could be that after a while they started to feel like family. Must be something about this house, and the love that lingered here, that gave people a sense of belonging, he decided.

"Come on," said Shirley. "I'll show you to your room. I hope you don't mind being on the third floor. I had considered putting in an elevator, but lately I've been thinking of more interesting ways to spend my money."

"That's okay, Aunt Shirley, I'll show him the way."

Although it would have been flattering to think the brunette's interest matched his own, Tucker got the distinct impression that she had another reason for offering to show him to his room.

She led him up the mahogany staircase to the third floor,

pausing a couple of times after the first level as if to give him an opportunity to catch his breath. But he had no trouble keeping up with her. With a view such as she offered, he much preferred to enjoy it from close range.

Upstairs, Tucker stepped into the room, and it felt as if he had retreated into the past. He set the duffel bag on the floor and let the sensations wash over him. The curtains, handmade patchwork quilt and scatter rugs were different from his childhood recollections, but they retained the flavor of the era. However, the curved sleigh bed and matching chifforobe had apparently been included in the sale of Willow Glen Plantation. Bending closer, he saw that the tiny carved initials, R.T.M., for Robert Tucker Maddock, had remained. Mrs. Newland had blown a gasket when she'd seen what he'd done, but after giving it some thought she'd promised to let it stay. At the time, Tucker didn't understand his surrogate mother's change of heart. In retrospect, he saw that she had kindly allowed a scared, lonely boy to make his mark in her home, on her family and in her heart.

Apparently unwilling to relinquish her hostess duties, Aunt Shirley joined them in the small room. "It is so good to have you join us for Christmas."

The brunette responded with a tightening of her softly curved lips, walked past him and pushed open the white lace curtains to allow in the meager late-afternoon sunlight. When she was done she turned and scrutinized him thoroughly. After a long, uncomfortable moment, she reluctantly announced, "Yes, I

suppose you do have the eyes.”

He had no idea what the young woman was talking about, but he supposed that his features may have stirred up a previously forgotten memory of having met his father. In a town this size, most people knew everyone else, even if only in passing. “People say I have the Maddock eyes,” he said.

If he’d had a choice in the matter, he would rather forgo the dark, devilish feature that attracted so much attention than have even that one small remaining link with his deceased father.

Aunt Shirley stepped forward, her arms open, and took him in a motherly hug. Pressing a light kiss to his cheek, she said, “We’re so glad to have you in our family.” Moving to the door, she added, “If there’s anything you need or want, just let one of us know, and we’ll see that you’re taken care of.”

With a wink and a wave, she exited the room and closed the door behind her.

The younger woman stayed where she was, arms across her chest, assessing him.

Still stunned by the older woman’s unexpected gesture, Tucker stood rooted to the faded blue throw rug, absentmindedly lifting a hand to his cheek where she had kissed him, and wondered if the woman before him might follow suit. He sure hoped so. He had heard that these bed-and-breakfast places sought to make their guests feel like members of the family, but in his estimation, the elderly woman took this home-and-hearth stuff a tad too far.

The door swung open again, and Aunt Shirley popped her

head in. "I almost forgot...hurry and unpack. We'll be waiting for you downstairs to help put up the Christmas tree."

He'd better nip this in the bud. If he didn't stop her now, she'd have him singing carols and baking Christmas cookies with the rest of the guests.

"Uh, Ms., I mean, Aunt Shirley, I'm not really up to trimming a Christmas tree this year." Although he was finding comfort in returning to the memories in this house, the Christmas traditions only served to remind him of all the loved ones he'd lost at this time of the year.

"Oh. It would present a bit of a problem if you don't join us. You see, Aunt Shirley isn't up to having a big crowd here after this season, so I'm trying to make this last one our best Christmas ever. It would really mean a lot if everyone would participate." The young woman looked thoughtful for a moment. "Would you rather put up the wreath or string Christmas lights instead?" The two of them seemed determined to have him participate in the festivities.

He sympathized with their business plan to cut back their tourist season. It must be difficult sacrificing their own Christmas activities in order to take care of a bunch of guests. But he still had no desire to change his plans in order to be with strangers. He solemnly shook his head.

Aunt Shirley grinned. "Holding out for hanging the mistletoe, eh? I figured you for a romantic, right from the start."

At the word romantic, his gaze veered back to the pretty

brunette. Impulsively, he asked, "Are you going to help?"

"Of course," she said, as if the answer should have been obvious.

He scratched the whiskers on his chin and took in her fair, flawless complexion. "Maybe I can come down for a short while."

"Good," said Shirley. "I'll tell everyone to wait for you." This time when she left, the older woman hooked the brunette's arm and steered her out of the room before her.

Downstairs, Ruth pulled out the dusty old Bible, her curious cousins, aunts and uncles gathering around her as they traced the family's lineage.

"He's cute," said fourteen-year-old Brooke.

"He's too old for you," Vivian stated, as if it weren't already apparent to everyone in the room. "I'm sure he'd prefer someone closer to his own age. Like me."

Ruth drew a finger down the page, searching for the Maddock name in the birth and marriage listings. "You're both being ridiculous," she said without lifting her head. "If he's a relative—which I doubt he is—he should be treated like any of our other cousins."

Brooke giggled. "Maybe he's a kissing cousin."

Ruth pushed her hair behind her shoulders and tried unsuccessfully to ignore her young cousin's remark. "Just as I thought. I don't see a record of a Maddock anywhere in here."

Oren nudged her aside with his cane and bent over the

book that lay open on the coffee table. He turned a page to the crowded family tree. Lilly Babcock, now deceased, was the matriarch of their close-knit family. Although Lilly and her husband Clem's daughters had married, introducing new surnames to the family tree, the subsequent generations still considered themselves Babcocks.

After a moment, Oren pressed his finger to a box with a line drawn from Ruth's great-grandmother Lilly. "There's a Helen in here who married a third cousin, but I don't see any sign of a Maddock or her giving birth to a Tucker."

Aunt Shirley joined them, leaning over the brittle pages. Her elderly boyfriend stood and moved beside her, taking her fingers in his own.

Ruth watched the exchange and was thankful once again that her aunt had found someone to love and who loved her so much in return. She hoped that someday she'd find a special man who made her as happy as Boris made Shirley.

The thought occurred to her that perhaps Boris was the reason Aunt Shirley had decided not to hold the Christmas family reunion again after this year. Such an event was an awful lot of work and planning, and it was understandable that her aunt would want to spend her time and energy on her personal pursuits. And that was why Ruth had stepped in and shouldered most of the hostessing duties this year. By making this their most perfect Christmas ever, she would relieve her aunt of much of the work while convincing her to give it a go again next year.

Their yearly reunion helped solidify Ruth's sense of family togetherness. Having lost her parents at a very young age, it was important to preserve and nurture her family ties. And someday she hoped to marry and add lots more names to their Bible.

Turning her attention back to the book, she recalled her great-aunt's earlier questioning of their handsome guest. "Do you suppose Helen remarried, Aunt Shirley, and you lost track of her?"

"If so, that would mean Tucker Maddock is only vaguely—and very distantly—related by marriage," Vivian said with interest. "A step-cousin, of sorts."

Ruth didn't know why this possibility should please her so much. Or why it should bother her that her sister was so quick to pick up on their nonexistent blood ties.

"I don't know." Aunt Shirley idly rubbed the wattle of skin under her left arm. "I think Helen and her first husband are still together. But I could be wrong. I haven't heard from them since right after Brooke was born, which would be about fourteen years ago."

A trickle of concern flowed down Ruth's spine, leaving goose bumps in its wake. Even if Helen had divorced and remarried a Maddock after that time, there was no way she could have a son who, by Ruth's best estimate, was about thirty years old.

Ruth smelled a rat, albeit the best-looking one she'd ever laid eyes on. Although Ruth Marsh was normally an easygoing person—so easygoing, in fact, that her fourth-grade students had

nicknamed her “Miss Marshmallow”—she could not sit idly by while some stranger with an ulterior motive invaded their home. Right in the midst of their Christmas celebrations, no less!

Like the rest of the Babcock family members, Aunt Shirley was a trusting soul, welcoming anyone and everyone into her life. In fact, it was that very generosity of spirit that had led the older woman to raise Ruth and her older sister after their parents had died.

Aunt Shirley had protected her when Ruth was a child, and now it was Ruth’s turn to repay the favor. She would not let this situation unfold like that roofing repair sham her family had fallen for. Or the unsecured-bond investment scheme Aunt Shirley had naively bought into.

“I don’t know, Aunt Shirley,” Ruth said. “Something doesn’t seem right about this particular long-lost relative. For all we know, he could be another shyster, or even an ax murderer.”

“Nonsense.” Aunt Shirley disengaged her hand from Boris’s grasp and closed the musty book. “I won’t have you talking about your own cousin that way. In every family there are three horse thieves for every prince. Regardless of whether his branch of the family tree is represented on a coat of arms or has a noose hanging from it, he’s still family.”

She straightened and addressed Ruth with an expression that made it clear she hadn’t learned the lesson taught by the roofer and investment crook. “I’m sure that nice young man has a perfectly reasonable explanation for his name not appearing in

our Bible.”

Ruth shook her head at her aunt’s complete trust in other people. The older woman had a reputation around Willow Glen as being wealthy and more than a little eccentric. She hated to think that another unscrupulous person might try to take advantage of that trust.

“Cousin Tucker is a fine fellow,” Aunt Shirley said, trying to reassure her. “Just give him a chance.”

Give him a chance to do what? Rob them blind? Murder them in their sleep? It was clear she would get nowhere with her family, so she let the subject rest for now. With a few well-chosen questions, she would soon ascertain the newcomer’s genealogical background as well as his intentions.

As Tucker came down the curved staircase, he saw the group huddled over a large Bible. They were probably reading the nativity story. He had serious doubts about his own sanity, agreeing to join in the Christmas celebrations when that was specifically what he’d been trying to avoid this year. If it weren’t for the brown-eyed brunette, he’d be in his room reveling in a game of solitaire right now.

If he’d been a suspicious man, he would conclude that certain women have the ability to zap men with a mysterious pheromone that robs them of their reasoning powers. If that were the case, he must have been hit with a double dose of the stuff.

By the time he entered the parlor, the group had finished their discussion or prayer or whatever, and all turned as one to

face him. Discomfited by their scrutiny, Tucker glanced down to make a quick assessment of his appearance: turtleneck tucked neatly into jeans, zipper up, and both socks matched. Nope, nothing wrong there.

When he looked up, they were still staring at him. Especially the brunette. Only she seemed to be studying him harder than the others.

The sandy-haired teenager with too much makeup spoke first. "Hey, cuz."

Tucker wrinkled his eyebrows. Cuz? He wasn't up on teen slang, but he hoped it was a compliment.

"Glad you could join us," said Aunt Shirley.

Oren spoke next. "She didn't twist your arm, did she? Shirley is the bossiest woman I've ever had the misfortune to know."

Rather than coming to her defense, the others smiled and nodded their agreement. Aunt Shirley smiled, too, as if she were proud of the distinction.

"No," Tucker said, "my arms are just fine." It was his brain he had to work on. He had come here to be alone, so why on earth was he standing amid ten strangers with the intent of celebrating the very holiday he'd been trying to avoid?

"Good," said Aunt Shirley, "then you can climb that ladder and use those arms to string the electric lights on the tree."

"There she goes again," Oren griped. Turning to the proprietress of the inn, he added, "The least you could do is introduce him to everybody before you start bossing him

around.”

The brunette stepped closer to Tucker. “That’s okay, I’ll take care of it.” Then she rattled off their names, pointing to each as she did so.

Aunt Shirley, he already knew, and her boyfriend Boris Schmidt. Then Oren Cooper and his wife Ada May. And their son, Dewey, who appeared to be in his fifties. Eldon and Rosemary Givens, and Brooke, their teenage daughter. The brunette’s sister, Vivian Marsh, with blue eyes so enormous she reminded him of a Siamese cat.

And, finally, the brunette.

“I’m Ruth,” she said, extending her hand.

Her hand was small yet strong. Just like the rest of her, he suspected. He couldn’t help wanting to get to know her better. Much better.

“Any of these names ring a bell?” she asked, sweeping a hand to indicate the people she’d just introduced.

Schmidt, Cooper, Givens, Marsh. He didn’t recognize the family names, but it had been a long time since he’d been home to Willow Glen. Even so, most of these people were older than his own thirty-one years, save the Marsh sisters, who appeared to be about his age or a little younger. And Brooke. Tucker shrugged, giving a gentle shake of his head.

A question niggled at the back of his mind. Assuming these people were all from Willow Glen, which was what Ruth had led him to believe by her implication that he should know them,

why were they here instead of celebrating Christmas in their own homes?

Well, they'd been grilling him about his family. Now it was his turn to ask a question or two. "I've heard of people whose Thanksgiving tradition is to drive to the Checkered Tablecloth on the other side of town for a turkey dinner with all the trimmings. Is gathering at Willow Glen Plantation a new Christmas tradition around here?"

Ruth quirked her mouth, her lips pressing firmly together as if she weren't satisfied with his negative response. Or the question he'd lobbed at her. "Something like that," she said as if he should have known.

In the next few minutes, the previously tidy parlor was strewn with ornaments, bows, lights and tinsel. Ruth reeled out the seemingly endless strings of lights as he attached them to the tree. The task threatened to overwhelm him with memories of the Newland family decorating a fresh-cut tree in this room so many years ago. Stringing the lights had been Mr. Newland's job, and he and Chris had hung the ornaments while Mrs. Newland stood back and pointed out bare spots. The only thing that kept him from bolting from the room was the woman who stood at his elbow, patiently handing up lights. And every time their hands touched, he had to fight the urge to pull her to him and kiss her breathless.

All the while, she kept firing questions at him. The only explanation he could imagine was that she thought he looked

familiar and was trying to establish how they may have first met.

He could have come right out and told her they'd never seen each other before this evening, but he liked the sound of her voice. Despite his earlier need for solitude, he found himself enjoying the company of the tiny woman with the giant curiosity.

When he claimed no knowledge of the various names she threw at him, her attitude seemed to change from curiosity to misgiving. Maybe she was finally figuring out that, although he might look familiar, they'd never met before today.

By the time they finished the tree, they'd settled into an uneasy silence. Tucker didn't know what had derailed their conversation. He didn't think he'd said anything out of the way. He'd tried asking her a few questions, like what part of Willow Glen she was from, but that seemed to make her even more edgy. So he turned his attention to the other guests and surprised himself by having a good time. For a brief while, the laughter and joking made him forget why he'd come to Willow Glen...and Willow Glen Plantation in particular. After the tree was finished and he'd helped put away the excess decorations, he excused himself and returned to his room.

Ruth watched him go up the stairs.

"The rear view is just as interesting as the front, eh?" Vivian teased.

"Yeah, but he has no business being here."

"Are you still on that?" Vivian put a hand to her perfectly styled bottle-blond hair. "Why can't you just leave the guy alone?"

He seems really nice. Very charming, if you ask me.”

“So did Ted Bundy, but I wouldn’t want him crashing my family reunion.”

“Who’s crashing our family reunion?” Brooke demanded. “Cousin Tucker?”

“He’s not our cousin,” Ruth insisted.

Brooke smiled broadly. “Cool. I call dibsies on him.”

Ruth rolled her eyes. “Don’t be ridiculous. For all we know, he could be an escaped convict.”

“Or maybe he’s with the Internal Revenue Service, and he’s snooping around for unreported income,” Vivian suggested. She smoothed her soft red sweater over her slim hips. “I wouldn’t mind him looking over my form. In fact, he can audit me anytime.”

Brooke giggled, but Ruth wasn’t amused. “You two may think it’s funny, but something about that guy bugs me.” He seemed to her like a man on a quest, but she wasn’t sure what he wanted from them. She glanced up the stairs, wondering what would motivate a perfect stranger to insinuate himself into their home for the holidays. Well, the others might be willing to swallow the notion that he was a family member, but Ruth knew otherwise. And she was determined to get to the bottom of it. “I’m going up there and see exactly what he’s doing.”

Vivian laughed. “Probably changing his clothes, if you’re lucky.”

Ignoring the laughter of her sister and young cousin, Ruth

mounted the steps, taking care to avoid the creaky ones. If Tucker Maddock was truly up to no good, she doubted he'd be so careless as to let her catch him at it. Even so, the least she could do was confront him about his identity and his intentions. She hadn't wanted to do so downstairs in front of the others, partly to keep from putting him on the spot in case he actually was related in a way she had overlooked, and partly because she knew her gullible family would rise to his defense even if he was an imposter as she suspected. After he'd charmed his way into her family members' hearts, joking and laughing while decorating the tree, they were convinced he could do no wrong.

As she climbed the last few steps to the third floor—the same level her room was on—she heard what sounded like something being scraped across the floor. Quietly, she made her way down the hall, glancing at the room numbers that remained from the house's brief bed-and-breakfast days. Ruth tapped lightly at the door of number nine. When no answer came, she turned the knob and peeked inside.

The room was empty.

Closing the door, Ruth went to her own room and checked to see if anything had been disturbed, but it looked the same as she'd left it earlier today. A glance around the empty hallway revealed that the attic door stood ajar several inches.

Ruth walked closer and saw that the attic light was on. Then she heard the sound again...a bump and a dragging scrape. Somebody was up there, and she had a good idea who it might be.

Moving quietly up the rickety stairs, she was at once shocked and yet not quite surprised to find their dark-haired houseguest running his hands over the loose floorboards where Aunt Shirley's trunk once sat. It was obvious he was searching for something.

Ruth placed her hands on her hips, enraged by the stranger's audacity.

“What do you think you're doing?”

Chapter Two

It was common knowledge in Willow Glen that Aunt Shirley had recently bought a new car with moldy money—cash that had apparently been buried somewhere on the property and retrieved when her dotty aunt was ready to make her purchase. Judging from the way Tucker had moved stuff around up here, it appeared as though he had heard about Aunt Shirley's odd banking habits and decided to make a withdrawal for himself. Just as she had suspected, he was not only a fraud, but an opportunist as well.

Tucker stood abruptly and cracked his head against the low attic ceiling. Rubbing the tender spot, he rumped his hair, which made him look even more devilish.

Humph! The others might be swayed by his charm and good looks, but Ruth had learned to develop an immunity to such virtues, especially after Aunt Shirley had been taken to the cleaners by the fly-by-night roofing repairman and the so-called investment counselor. Besides, she had seen it all and heard it all, from adorable fourth-grade boys and girls who were adept at manipulating their parents and other adults into giving them what they wanted.

Ruth had a sixth sense about knowing when her students were up to mischief, but it didn't take a psychic to see that something was definitely off-kilter here.

"It's not what you think," he said, putting a hand up to the

exposed beam he'd cracked his head against a moment before. He seemed to consider something for a moment, then asked, "Do you work here?"

"Do I work here? What kind of question is that?" Sure, she was working—especially this year as she sought to relieve her aunt of the burden of being hostess to so many houseguests. But he had asked as if he thought she were being paid to do her labors of love. Ruth climbed the remaining steps into the attic, but she didn't have to stoop as he did. "What I want to know is what you're looking for."

"Well, it's a long story, actually." Tucker wondered if he should go into the drawn-out course of events that had brought him here. When she hollered downstairs for Aunt Shirley to call the sheriff, he decided it would be prudent to start explaining. He paused, wondering how to begin.

"I'm waiting." Her toe tapped the rough board beneath her feet. Her arms were crossed over her chest, and he tried not to notice how that simple action enhanced an already admirable feature of hers.

Before he could begin, Eldon came galloping up the stairs with Brooke hot on his heels. "Stay behind me, Brooke. I don't want you to get hurt."

He brandished a small pearl-handled pistol and scanned the close confines of the attic, his gaze skipping past Ruth and Tucker. He turned his back to Tucker, who was grateful to be out of range of the waving pistol, and faced the woman who had

called for help.

“What’s the matter, Ruthie? Did you see a mouse again?”

“No, I saw a rat,” she said, pointing past Eldon, “and he’s standing right behind you.”

Brooke did an about-face and returned to the stairs. “Gross! I’m outta here.”

Curious onlookers blocked her retreat. Tucker peered down the stairs as Eldon aimed the gun at Aunt Shirley’s trunk. Sure enough, there in the hall stood Aunt Shirley and the rest of the guests.

Ruth tugged Eldon’s sleeve in an effort to regain his attention. “I wasn’t talking about a rat rat. I was referring to a person rat.”

“Well, why didn’t you say so?”

Once again, Eldon looked past Tucker as he searched for an intruder.

“Him!” Ruth stepped closer and patted Tucker’s arm. “This rat.”

Obviously confused now, Eldon stuffed the gun into his waistband. “Cousin Tucker? What’d he do?”

“Good grief, Ruth,” piped in her older sister, “if you go with a guy to the attic, you really can’t complain if he gets fresh with you.”

Ruth sighed a huge breath of exasperation. “He didn’t get fresh.”

“Sounds like they need some mesh,” said Boris from his vantage point in the hall.

Aunt Shirley patted his hand. "Turn up your hearing aid, dear."

By now, Ruth's face had turned a becoming shade of pink. Tucker wasn't sure whether that was from the cold or from her anger at having found him here. He rather liked Vivian's interpretation of the current scenario and briefly wondered if Ruth would consider an invitation to come back up here with him later. He looked over at her and saw that the sleepy expression in her eyes had been replaced by barely suppressed fury. Maybe now wouldn't be a good time to suggest such a rendezvous.

"I didn't come with him to the attic, I found him here." She pointed an accusing finger at Tucker's chest. "This man is an imposter. He came here, pretending to be a part of the family, just so he could rip us off."

"Family? What family?" Tucker took a step toward Ruth, ducking to avoid the noggin-hazard beam. When Eldon touched a hand to his waistband, Tucker figured he'd better start talking. Fast. "Look, I can explain everything."

"Great," said Ruth. "Then you can begin by explaining exactly where you fit into the Babcock family reunion."

"I don't know who the Babcocks are, or anything about their family reunion. I just came here for some peace and quiet."

"Ha!" Ruth whirled to face the others. "See, I told you he wasn't our cousin."

"You're right," said Vivian. "If he knew anything at all about our family, he wouldn't have come here for peace and quiet."

Tucker scratched his head and took a seat on the old trunk. "You folks are all family?" At their affirmative nods, he asked, "Then what are you doing here at a bed-and-breakfast inn?"

The fiercely determined expression on Ruth's face dissolved into confusion. "This place hasn't been a bed-and-breakfast inn for almost eight years."

"But the Newlands, they sold it..."

"Right," said Ruth, "and when the inn went broke three years later, Aunt Shirley bought it. We've been having our Christmas reunions here ever since."

"You mean you're not our cousin after all?" Vivian asked. Ruth could have sworn she saw an interested gleam in her sister's eyes.

Tucker shook his head. Now that Chris Newland and his parents were gone... "I don't have any family."

"And you're spending Christmas alone?" Ruth asked, temporarily forgetting about his being a potential thief as she imagined him spending the holiday by himself.

"That was the plan." He rose from his perch on the trunk. "I'm really sorry about crashing your reunion. I'll go gather my things and get out of your way."

Aunt Shirley hollered up into the attic. "Where will you go? The motels around here must be full."

He leaned forward to peer down at the speaker. "Yes, ma'am, they are. I'll just go back to my apartment in the city."

"And who would you spend Christmas with?" Ruth asked.

Tucker shrugged. "I'll probably just go to work at the office. It's amazing how much you can get done when no one else is around."

"You're not going to spend Christmas alone." Aunt Shirley's words were an order. "You're going to stay right here and celebrate the season with us."

"That's very kind of you, ma'am, but I really don't belong here."

Ruth rubbed her arms to ward off the chill as she forced herself to remember that this stranger was an unwanted intruder. "You're right about that. And you still haven't explained why you were snooping through Aunt Shirley's attic."

"We're letting all the heat from the house up here," he said. "Why don't we go downstairs, and I'll be happy to answer your questions."

As the family members moved down the stairs, Ruth said to Eldon, "I think you should frisk him before he leaves this attic. There's no telling what he may have found before I caught him."

Tucker couldn't blame her for feeling this way. He'd be suspicious, too, if some stranger showed up on his doorstep and rummaged through his belongings.

"I ain't friskin' Cousin Tucker!"

Downstairs in the parlor, ten pairs of eyes studied the stranger who sat in their midst. They had just finished telling him about their initial assumption that he was a long-lost cousin. Now they were waiting for his explanation.

They were nice people. He doubted he'd be as understanding if someone had infiltrated his home. Ruth's reaction was closer to what his own would be, except that she didn't have the strength to pick him up and literally throw him out of the house. Instead, she sat there throwing daggers with her eyes. She was skeptical, and he didn't blame her. He plucked a strand of tinsel off the tree and toyed with it as he collected his thoughts.

"I started coming to Willow Glen Plantation when I was ten," he began. In the next few minutes, he explained how he'd come to consider the Newlands his family and this big old house his own. He'd thought that by returning here he could relive some happy memories.

Ruth still wasn't convinced. The others were hanging on his every word, but she'd learned not to take everything at face value. For instance, his claim of being a high-ranking corporate executive clashed sharply with the leather- and jeans-clad interloper who had barged uninvited into their home. What she couldn't understand was why the rest of her family couldn't see what she saw. And why hadn't they learned from Aunt Shirley's earlier bad experiences? "What about the attic?"

"I'm getting to that."

That piece of tinsel was getting wound around his fingers, weaving and curving in just the way she suspected the speaker was winding her own trusting family around those same fingers.

"Chris Newland was my best friend," he said. "He was like a brother to me. The year we turned eleven, we decided to make

it official by becoming blood brothers. We signed a pact, put it in an envelope and sealed it with our blood.” He turned to Ruth. “That’s what I was looking for in the attic. We hid it under a loose board.”

He seemed shaken. For a moment, Ruth’s heart went out to him. But then she remembered that scam artists could be very convincing.

“So why, after all these years, did you finally decide to come looking for the envelope?”

“Ease up on the boy,” said Aunt Shirley. “Can’t you see he’s upset?”

And couldn’t they see she was only trying to be prudent? Couldn’t they see that someone needed to look out for the best interests of the family?

“That’s okay,” said Tucker. Although his words were directed to Aunt Shirley, his gaze met Ruth’s and held it. “If I were in her shoes, I’d be asking the same questions.” Then, to Ruth, he said, “I didn’t come here looking for the envelope. As I said before, I came for some peace and quiet.”

He sighed deeply before continuing.

“Chris and his parents were killed in a traffic accident last Christmas. Seeing this big old house again brought back lots of memories, one of them being the pact Chris and I signed.”

Aunt Shirley stood, signaling an end to the interrogation. “If you want peace and quiet, honey, then that’s exactly what you’ll get. You go on back up to your room. I’ll give everybody strict

orders not to disturb you. If you don't feel like coming downstairs for meals, just let me know and I'll bring 'em up to you."

"Aunt Shirley!" Ruth couldn't believe her ears. "You can't let a complete stranger live in our house. You don't even know if he's telling the truth. He could have a criminal record or...or mental problems." Realizing, after the words were out, how they must have sounded, she said to Tucker, "No offense, but we've been burned before."

Oren took the sting out of her words by adding cheerfully, "You'll know he has mental problems if he chooses to stay in this house."

Tucker grinned. The bickering, the teasing, the noise and commotion...it all reminded him of the happy times he had spent with the Newlands in this house.

"I can't send him back to the city to work through the holidays," Aunt Shirley insisted. "Everybody's got to be somewhere at Christmas...he may as well be here. Besides, we have plenty of room."

"Yeah, Ruth," said Vivian. "Don't be such a wet blanket."

Judging from the look Ruth threw her sister, he doubted Vivian's words helped his case. Not that it mattered. No matter how enticing Aunt Shirley's offer might sound, he couldn't accept. It wouldn't be right.

On the other hand, his only other option—working through the holidays—was less appealing than remaining here. At home, he'd be miserable. He'd be miserable no matter where he was,

but at least this was a change of scenery. And the best part of the scenery was the lovely young woman who was watching him as if he might steal the silverware.

He definitely wanted something from her, but silverware wasn't what he had in mind.

Aunt Shirley interrupted his hesitation. "I insist."

"Then I insist on paying regular hotel rates, and for the meals as well."

Tucker didn't know what made him agree to stay, but he suspected Ruth had something to do with it. It was nothing she said or did. More, it was a feeling he got from her. Although they came from different circumstances, he sensed they shared a common bond. He detected an undercurrent stirring her soul, creating a whirlpool of emotions in her inner being. As for himself, his whirlpool felt like a deep, black hole out of which he feared he'd never emerge. But, for some reason, that hole seemed a little less black, a little less bottomless, when he was near Ruth.

"We'll discuss that at checkout time," said Aunt Shirley, smiling. Then she mumbled something about making room at the inn in Bethlehem. The older woman seemed obviously pleased to have him join their household.

He could tell, however, that Ruth was not happy with the arrangement.

Ruth wasn't happy with the arrangement. She suspected the charming newcomer was up to no good, and she wondered why she was the only one who could see through this guy. But

her family's willing acceptance of the stranger and their open invitation to him were thwarting her attempts to protect her impulsive aunt. Maybe he'd been telling the truth about the blood-brothers pact. But what if he hadn't been?

She got a stack of plates out of the cabinet and placed them around the table. When she was done with that, she returned to the cabinet for glasses. As she reached for the first one, a movement through the window over the sink caught her eye. A leather-jacketed figure was moving the two-seater convertible sports car to the carriage-house-turned-garage behind the house. Of course. He wouldn't want anyone ripping off his car while he ripped off her aunt.

He was convincing, that was certain. But apparently she was the only one who picked up on the subtle vibes that their handsome visitor sent out. Sure, Vivian and Brooke had picked up on some vibes, but she suspected they were more hormonal than anything else. Besides, Vivian picked up vibes from—and sent out signals to—all red-blooded males.

The message Ruth received from him was that he was a man on a mission. True, he was looking for something, but Ruth was convinced the “something” he sought was not a slip of paper under a floorboard. There was more. And she intended to find out what else he was after.

Ruth leaned against the sink and watched as he came out of the carriage house, pausing in the doorway to survey the grounds. Tucker was a devilishly good-looking man, no doubt about it.

Something brushed against her arm, pulling her back to the present.

Vivian nudged her with an elbow. "Want me to get a mop? Someone could slip and fall in that puddle of drool."

Ruth bristled at her sister's misinterpretation. "I just don't think he should have the run of the place. Who knows what he might be getting into?"

"Let it rest," said Vivian. "By the way, Aunt Shirley said to add another plate for dinner. She talked Cousin Tucker into joining us this evening."

By now, Ruth was gritting her teeth. "He's not our cousin!"

"Yeah. So?"

There was no arguing with these people. Once her headstrong family members had their minds made up, there was no changing them. And since, for the space of about forty-five minutes, they'd thought Tucker to be their cousin, he would forever after have that status. Talk about family ties!

Ruth got out another plate, and Vivian helped her carry the rest of the glasses to the large formal dining room.

When dinner was served, it turned out to be anything but formal. The noise and commotion were enough to make the Ringling Brothers envious. Aunt Shirley had to rap her tea glass with her spoon to quiet everyone for the blessing.

After grace was said, Brooke began filling Tucker in on who was who in their family, starting with Ada May. "Did you know Aunt Ada's a hooker?" she asked matter-of-factly.

Tucker glanced down the table at the sweet white-haired woman who appeared to be every bit of eighty years old. This was the one who, while they were decorating the Christmas tree, became embarrassed when Brooke casually used the word pregnant to describe the situation of a girl at her school. Ada May had hastily advised her young niece to say “in the family way” instead.

But now, having been called a hooker, she merely nodded sweetly, the flesh of her chin bobbing as she did so.

Tucker turned to the girl beside him and spoke in a low, unbelieving tone. “She used to do that, eh?”

“Still does,” Brooke insisted. “Don’t you, Aunt Ada?”

Ada May nodded again, making the flesh under her chin ripple like water on a rock-skipped pond. “I tried to get Oren interested in doing it, too, but it’s not his cup of tea. He said the little bit of money I get out of it isn’t worth all the effort I put into it.”

Tucker frowned, trying to make sense of it. “You actually have...customers? And Oren doesn’t mind?”

“Sure, I have them lined up waiting for my next piece,” she said. “And of course Oren doesn’t mind.” She bestowed a loving look on her husband. “He likes to watch me work...says it’s very relaxing.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Oh, no, I wouldn’t kid you. If you’d like, we can go into the parlor this evening, and I’ll show you some of the tricks and fancy maneuvers I’ve learned over the years. I won’t even charge you.”

Tucker rubbed his chin, scratching the newly sprouted bristles. “That’s, uh, very generous of you.”

Sitting beside the elderly woman, Ruth smiled at Tucker as she patted her aunt’s hand. “If you don’t have time for a lesson,” she told him, “perhaps you’d rather take a look at the assortment of rugs Aunt Ada has hooked.”

Brooke giggled as the cat was let out of the bag. However, judging from Ruth’s careful selection of words, it was clear they were not to let the elderly craftswoman know she’d been the butt of a naughty joke. She’d surely die of embarrassment.

Tucker took the hint and decided that changing the subject would lessen the chances of Ada finding out what was so funny.

“In that case,” he confided aloud to the girl beside him, “I guess you could say I was once in a motorcycle gang.”

“Really?” Brooke looked skeptical.

“Yep. When I was eight I joined a gang of kids who all wished we had motorcycles.” He nodded thoughtfully. “We even got lick-and-stick tattoos.”

Although Brooke rolled her eyes in the age-old tradition of teenagers, Tucker was rewarded with a smile from Ruth.

He liked her smile. He supposed it was the infamous Babcock smile since many of the people sitting at the table shared a similar feature. But hers was somehow different. Although her sister’s smile was more stunning in an overt sort of way, Ruth’s seemed to hint that there was quite a bit more to her than what showed on the surface.

And despite her understandable apprehension toward him, he wanted to get to know her better. Explore those marvelous Babcock lips. Make them turn upward with satisfaction like a cat that's had its fill of cream.

She averted her gaze and scooped up a forkful of mashed potatoes. Tucker watched, transfixed, as she brought it up to those full, lush lips that pursed to receive it.

"When's the last time you had a home-cooked meal like this?" Oren demanded.

Reluctantly, Tucker pulled his attention away from the lovely woman who had held him in her spell and turned it to Oren. He surveyed the blue china plate that was heaped with mashed potatoes, green beans, corn pudding, succotash, hot biscuits and meatloaf smothered in onion gravy. The last time he'd eaten like this was...well, when he'd been here with the Newlands.

"Oh, about eleven or twelve years, I suppose."

"You poor thing," said Aunt Shirley as she passed him the bowl of potatoes. "Eat up, dear. We have plenty. And there's pumpkin pie for dessert."

The rest of the meal passed in a blur, with everyone trying to get him to take more than his fill.

When everyone was finished, he picked up his plate as he'd always done with the Newlands and started to carry it to the kitchen. At the doorway, he paused. Emboldened by the family's unconditional acceptance, he considered the opportunity that presented itself. When Ruth, apparently unaware of his

hesitation, collided into his back, he decided to go for it.

Recovering, she tried to peer around him. "What's the holdup?"

Turning around, Tucker took care to block the doorway to keep her from moving past the threshold. With a satisfied grin tugging at his lips, he met her questioning gaze and pointed to the cluster of greenery that dangled above them.

He glanced at the woman beside him to see how she was taking this obvious setup.

Not well. Her brown eyes flashed a warning at her giggling cousin, but it was too late. The rest of the relatives were now in on it and cheering them on.

Tucker flashed her his most encouraging smile. "The first Christmas kiss of the season is good luck."

"Really? I never heard of that tradition."

"Neither did I," Tucker admitted. "I just made it up."

The kinfolk behind them formed a semicircle to get a better look. Though Tucker found the idea of kissing her quite appealing, he would have liked it better if they'd been here alone.

"Just do it and get it over with," said Aunt Shirley. "If you make us old people stand here much longer, our varicose veins are going to explode."

Tucker looked at Ruth and gave a questioning shrug.

She returned with a resigned sigh. "We may as well do it, because they won't leave us alone until we do."

He took the plate from her and set them both on the sideboard.

Then he lifted his arms, unsure whether he should hold her or just bend down and give her a little peck on the cheek. When she moved forward, face upturned and lips slightly puckered, he immediately discarded the latter idea.

Her arms hung by her sides, a clear indication that he was not to take this too seriously. He rested his hands on her shoulders. Although the bulky sweater made her look soft and round, her arms were lean and firm under his touch.

They each tilted to their right but still managed to bump noses. She looked away, embarrassed. While she was distracted, he touched his mouth to hers, the movement brief yet decisive. And more than a little pleasurable.

She tasted of sweetened iced tea, and her lips were warm, soft and surprisingly welcoming. Her eyes closed for an awe-inspiring second. For the briefest of instants, Tucker almost forgot they were surrounded by family.

When their lips parted, she met his gaze, all signs of embarrassment gone. Her clear, golden-brown eyes appeared to be smiling, as if she may have enjoyed the kiss as much as he had.

The first Christmas kiss under the mistletoe. As far as he was concerned, it was indeed a lucky kiss.

Feeling magnanimous after his victory, he lifted his head to thank his lucky stars and the little green ball of leaves that dangled over their heads.

“Oops, I was mistaken,” he told her without a hint of remorse. “That’s not mistletoe...it’s holly.”

Chapter Three

Ruth didn't know why she had agreed to that stupid Christmas kiss thing Tucker made up a couple of days ago. At first she told herself it was because she knew her persistent family wouldn't leave her alone until she'd been manipulated into initiating the silly ritual.

But then, lying in bed later that night, she had to admit—if only to herself—that a tiny part of her had wanted to kiss Tucker. A very tiny part, of course.

Unfortunately, it did little to satisfy her curiosity, if that's what one called the strange little yearning that had invaded her well-being since "Cousin" Tucker's arrival. Instead, it was just enough to tantalize her into wanting a better sampling. It was like the nibble-size morsels of food they give away at the grocery store, usually at mealtime so the shopper can't get enough of the tasty fare.

And tasty fare he was. For a man as good-looking as Tucker Maddock, he was a surprisingly good kisser, especially considering the fact that he was holding back because of her family's presence. In her limited experience, she'd found that men of average appearance were usually better kissers than their handsome counterparts because they felt a need to compensate.

The tiny hairs prickled on the back of her neck. Maybe he was such a good kisser because he was compensating for some

devious leanings. If he was truly a con man, he wouldn't want to leave anything to chance when wooing his next victim.

Then again, he may have just had a lot of experience.

In the three short days since he'd come to stay with them, he had managed to win over her entire family. Ruth had merely tried to keep a safe distance and a watchful eye.

Although Tucker made her uneasy by his presence, she was even more concerned when he stayed in his room and out of her sight as he had most of this morning. She'd found him in the attic once. Where might she find him next?

She got up from the sofa to throw the last log on the fire. It had been cold for the past few weeks, but last night the weather had turned bitter.

"Don't forget to bring in some more wood," Aunt Shirley told Boris. "Tonight's supposed to be even worse than last night."

As luck seemed to be having it lately—or perhaps it was carefully calculated timing—Tucker happened to be walking past the parlor as her aunt made her request.

He poked his head into the room. "I was on my way out to check on my car after I get something to drink," he told them. "I'll pick up some wood while I'm out there."

Boris, obviously relieved to be released from the chore, flashed his dentures at their houseguest.

"Why don't you get the wood while I fix you some hot chocolate?" Ruth suggested. That way she could keep an eye on him through the kitchen window as she prepared the beverage,

and perhaps she could learn some more about him as he drank it.

Tucker seemed surprised by her apparent change of heart. Nevertheless, he pulled on a pair of gloves and his leather jacket over his sweater and went out after showing a heart-stopping smile of thanks. Her heart turned a tiny flip at the seemingly innocent gesture, but she immediately tamped down the emotions that threatened her objectivity. She needed to be clear-headed when dealing with a pro such as Tucker.

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