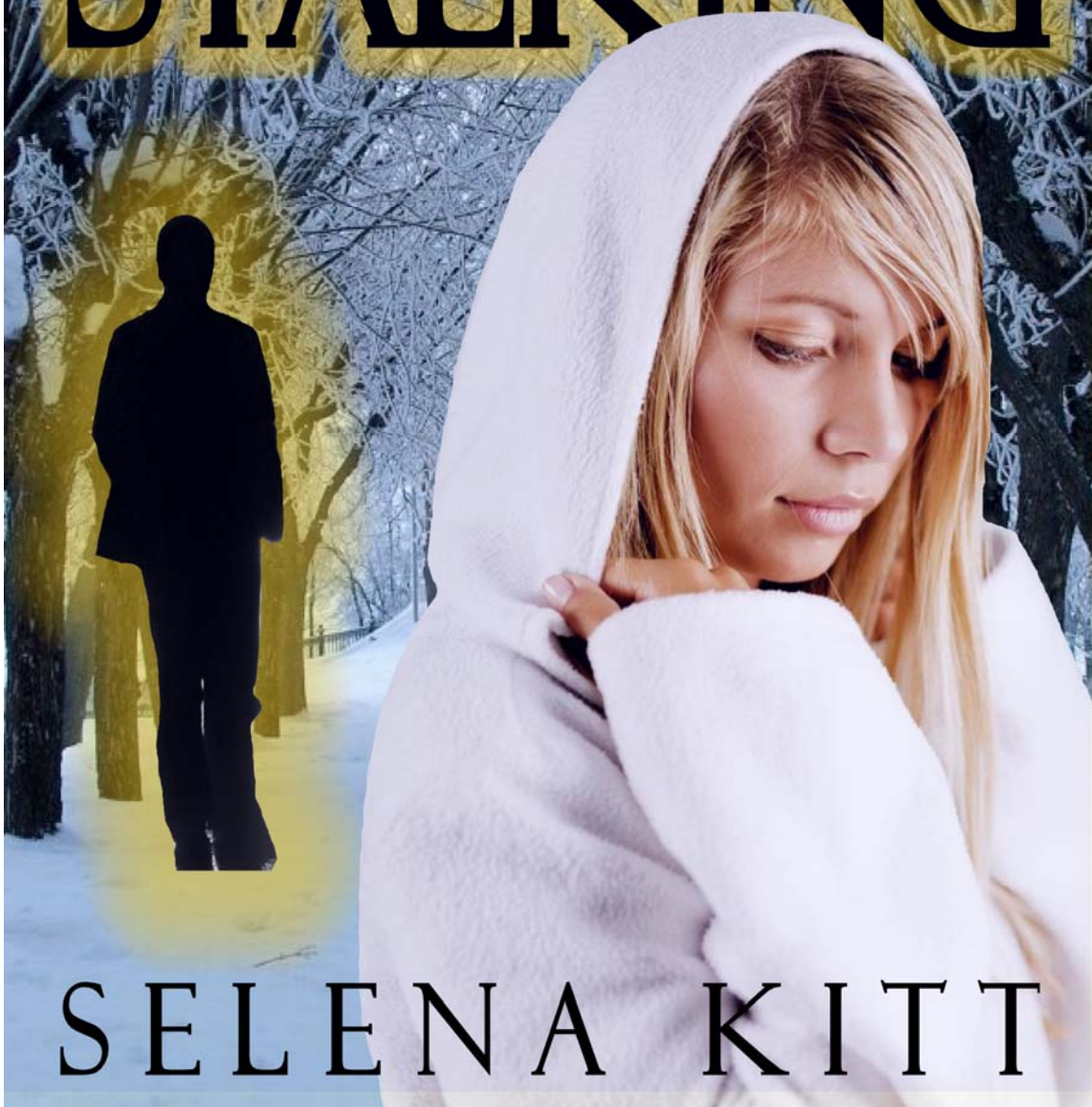


Christmas STALKING



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Christmas Stalking

By Selena Kitt

Chapter One

A police siren howled in the early morning haze and Ginny woke with a start, stifling a scream and cowering in the cold, dark vestibule. She drew a shaky breath, the images of her dream lingering. She found it difficult to differentiate between memory and imagination—everything seemed like a threat. Pulling her coat around her, she sought warmth and comfort and found neither. Instead, her mind flooded with the memory of his bruising grip, the push and pull that would inevitably lead to more pain.

This was the only place she felt even remotely safe. No one ever returned movies after midnight—that was a gamble Ginny was sure would pay off, and she'd been right so far. The video store's little cubbyhole was dark and, though it wasn't heated, it was at least twenty degrees warmer than outside. Best of all, it was great protection from the wind.

It was the perfect place to curl up and sleep, tucked into the corner in the vestibule between the two doors. The glassed-in area served as the perfect nook, a six by six square of warmth and safety that the store couldn't lock because, to return movies, customers had to access the flip-top slot located inside the little foyer. Luckily for Ginny, the "Return Movies Here" bin never saw any action until people were on their way to work in the morning, and by then she was up and looking for breakfast.

If it were a big chain store like Blockbuster, she would've been worried about security cameras or even guards patrolling. This, though, was just a little

mom-and-pop operation, a family video store where the kids' movies were always free and they gave away popcorn with every rental.

She always set her watch alarm and forced herself to make it out the door while it was still dark and she could slip behind the strip mall unnoticed. The world was a different place at five in the morning. It was something she had never known on those school days before her older sister, Maggie, had left them. After that, it was just Ginny and their stepfather, Patrick, alone together in a very small space.

Ginny had never known how still and empty it was at five in the morning. Each eerily haloed streetlight became both a beacon and an announcement. She found herself stepping around the orange-tinged circles, as if crossing that barrier would set off an ominous warning, some universal alarm.

She discovered a veritable smorgasbord behind the strip mall, where there was a Chinese carryout restaurant and a Dunkin' Donuts. Donut holes were prone to going stale and she could often find enough of those to stave off the gnawing hole in her belly. She'd been afraid to eat the leftovers from the Chinese restaurant, but had found little stapled wax paper packages of egg rolls on several occasions that had been a real treat.

Then she discovered the houses behind the alleyway. Most of them put their trash out on Tuesdays, and she had found a myriad of treasures: a pair of gloves with a hole in one thumb, several mismatched pairs of socks, and some old, scratched up Matchbox cars for her nephews. She'd been fortunate at the house behind the alleyway of the video store, and she wasn't disappointed this

morning. In a box next to the trash, was a lucky find: an unopened jar of Jif peanut butter, a small bottle of apple juice and a Scrunchie ponytail holder. Her stomach lurched at the sight of the peanut butter!

She shoved the bottle of apple juice in her coat pocket and slipped the Scrunchie over her wrist. She unscrewed the lid of the peanut butter and peeled back the foil, breaking the creamy, smooth surface with her index finger. She licked it off, sucking hard to get it all. Pure peanuty heaven! Her stomach growled and she satisfied it as fast as she could without a spoon, fingering as much as she could into her mouth at a time. It was like buttery velvet melting on her tongue. She wasn't even aware she was making little mewling noises, like a starving kitten settling in to nurse, or that she had wandered under the light of a streetlamp.

That's when she saw him out of the corner of her eye, standing less than ten feet away to her right. She took an immediate step back, thinking fast enough to put the lid back on her peanut butter and slip it into her other coat pocket. Beyond him was the shortest route to open space and freedom. Behind her was a very long alleyway that didn't break out into a clearing for the length of a football field.

She couldn't make out his features because he was in the shadows, just that he was big, very big, even taller than her stepfather and wider across the shoulders by far. He looked like he had run the length of several football fields in his time, and she guessed he could run down the stretch of the alleyway after her without breaking a sweat.

Ginny took a step back, then another, her instincts moving her of their own volition. He didn't move toward her, just stood there in the darkness, watching. That's when she noticed the white plastic bag he was holding by his left side. Her heart hammered faster as she realized he must live here in the house, where she rummaged almost daily through the trash can. He was just taking out the garbage.

She thought to say something, apologize, explain, but instead she turned and ran. The pavement was slippery—it had been sleeting last night and now there was a slight sheen of ice over the blacktop. She didn't care, she just ran, skidding once into the dumpster behind Dunkin' Donuts, where she would've normally stopped to look for confections. She didn't dare look back. She thought she heard him call out to her, "Hey! Come back!" but she wasn't sure. It might have been her imagination or just her heart pounding in her ears.

She wondered if she would even dare to go back to her spot at the video store tonight. Lamenting the possible loss of her hiding place, Ginny shoved her hands into her pockets, put her head down to the wind, and began to walk the three blocks to the 7-Eleven. The convenience store clerk was the young kid who worked there on weekdays and he watched her walk to the back to use the bathroom like she did every other morning. This bathroom was perfect, very clean, one toilet, a sink and a door that locked behind her. The one she used at the Shell station across the street wasn't as nice, and didn't have the hand dryer, which she had found invaluable.

Ginny shrugged her backpack down and peeled off her layers of clothing. Her long heavy jacket, wool outside and padded inside, was blessedly warm. It had been her mother's. It was followed by a sweater, a turtleneck, a sports bra, heavy hiking boots, a pair of jeans over two pairs of leggings and two pairs of socks.

She stood in front of the cracked mirror, shivering in her panties, and turned on the water to let it get warm while she rummaged in her backpack for the case that held her soap, toothbrush, and toothpaste.

Something small and rectangular fell out of the bag and clattered against the tile. She gasped, snatched it back up and held it close to her chest. It seemed impossible that something so small could be her only hope of safety. The tape was no bigger than a box of breath mints. It was the kind used in camcorders, and it bore no label, nothing to reveal the horror it contained. She tucked it back into her bag, burying it deep, like a treasure, then turned her attention back to her morning routine.

Sometimes, she could hear people in the store, customers or the clerk, talking to one another, but no one had ever come knocking on the door during her morning ritual. Her panties came off, and she peed, her bladder near bursting, then she washed her panties in the sink using her ever-dwindling bar of soap. She was going to have to figure out how to get another.

It was a lesson in acrobatics trying to wash at the sink. Leaning over, she washed her face, then her white-blond hair, which she did every other day, but never on days when it was below freezing. She scrubbed her upper body, her

ribs prominent, her belly concave. She managed to clean the light blonde thatch of pubic hair by straddling the sink, scooping water with her hands to rinse.

After drying off with paper towels, she wrung out the water from her hair as well as she could, and then bent over in front of the hand dryer in an attempt to dry her hair. She brushed her teeth, sad to lose the taste of peanut butter in her mouth, but smiling at the thought of the rest of the jar in her pocket. She used the newly found Scrunchie to pull her hair back. That was her second favorite find this morning, something she hadn't thought to throw in her backpack when she left. She was going to really appreciate it on her daily walks, when the wind whipped her long hair against her face so hard it made her gasp.

When her hair was mostly dry, it was time to get re-dressed. She put on a clean pair of underwear and did a quick smell-test on the clothing closest to her body—the leggings, the turtleneck, her socks. Then, she began the process of pulling it all on again, layer after layer. She struggled to zip up her jeans over the two pairs of leggings, and put her foot up on the toilet lid so she could lace her hiking boots.

Dressed and warm again, she dried the washed panties the best she could under the dryer and stuffed them into her backpack. She tried to take a less obvious way out of the store, edging along the dairy cooler and past the magazine rack. She didn't know if they cared if she used the bathroom, or even if they noticed, but she didn't want to find out.

It was already warming up outside, although her watch said it was only 6:15 a.m. She'd been lucky so far. Michigan winters could be brutal, but they

were also unpredictable. It could be forty degrees in December, like it felt today might be, or it could be close to zero. She didn't know how well the video store was going to do at night if they started hitting the single digits. She was going to have to scout out some other possibilities, and soon, but not today. It would take her an hour to walk to the shelter to see Maggie. She had promised to visit on Tuesday, and she hated disappointing her nephews.

* * * *

Thankfully, the boys were waiting for her when she arrived, because she dreaded going into the shelter. She kept praying this women's shelter's claims to Maggie were true—that they were invisible, anonymous, unable to be found, even by law enforcement, not only for Maggie and the boys' sake, but her own as well. If Patrick managed to find them, she was dead.

Her chest constricted, remembering The Mission Shelter downtown. She'd been there for the soup line, something to ease the ache in her belly, but she'd looked up and seen Patrick, a paragon of virtue and civic duty, doling out food to the less fortunate. She thought she could slip out unnoticed, but he'd seen her, his eyes darkening, his mouth twisting into a fast snarl as he pursued her through the kitchen and past the dumpsters. She knew he sometimes volunteered, but had this been a coincidence, or was he looking for her? She lost him at the last moment, ducking into an unlocked warehouse and huddling in the bathroom until dark. In that moment, she realized how much danger she was really in, that just her presence meant serious trouble for Maggie and the boys.

“Aunt Ginny! Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go!” The boys chanted, jumping around her like they were on pogo sticks. She laughed and, putting one hand on Sean’s mop of red hair and the other on Michael’s fine blonde curls, she turned them back toward the building.

“Go get your mom,” she instructed. “You guys meet me over there at the park and I’ll push you on the swings. Ready? Go!”

They tore off running, their coats unzipped and flying out behind them. She watched them jostle for position at the door. Sean looked more like Patrick every time she saw him, and his reed-like figure next to Michael’s substantial bulk made them look less like brothers than any two boys she’d seen. They had the same stark blue eyes and Maggie’s upturned nose, but that was as far as any similarities went.

When they burst out of the door again only a few minutes later, Maggie was following them, shrugging on her coat and calling after them to slow down. They hit Ginny from behind with the force of two small whirling tornadoes, knocking the wind out of her. She gasped, picked up Michael, swung him onto her hip and held him there with one hand, while she took Sean’s hand with the other. Maggie fell in line next to them, breathless from trying to catch up to the boys.

“I’m on kitchen duty today, sorry I wasn’t out here, I know you hate going in,” she apologized, reaching to tug a twig out of Sean’s hood.

Ginny shrugged, whispering nonsense into Michael’s ear and making him giggle and pull away.

"I didn't have to go in. The monster patrol was out here waiting for me, weren't ya?" Ginny tousled Sean's irresistible mop again. He ducked and rolled his eyes, sticking out his tongue at her.

"They were? Sean and Michael, I told you to stay inside those doors, didn't I?" Maggie admonished.

The boys pretended they hadn't heard her, Michael wiggling to get down when Sean challenged, "Let's race to the swings!" and off they went.

"I'll be glad to start that temp job next week." Maggie tucked her hands into her coat pockets. "They need more structure than this place. They'll have preschool in the morning and the shelter helped me find daycare for the afternoons. Now if we could only find our own place..."

"What happened to that little apartment on Fourth Street?"

They sat on the park bench, watching the boys struggle to get their bottoms onto the big-boy swings, their legs dangling uselessly. Ginny knew it was only moments before they were going to call out to her, "Swing me, swing me, do underdog!" She waited, wanting to hear what her sister had to say.

"Oh, Gin, it's so perfect!" Maggie clutched Ginny's arm in excitement. "A bedroom apiece for the boys! But the landlord wants the first month's rent and a security deposit—that's a thousand dollars! Do you know how long it's going to be before I can save that amount of money?"

Maggie's eyes, shining just moments ago, now welled up with tears. "I thought we'd be out of here by Christmas. I don't want them to have to spend Christmas in a shelter."

"I know." Ginny's jaw tightened. She looked back out toward the swings where Sean had generously gotten down to give his brother a start-push.

"How are things at home now?" Maggie attempted a change of subject, wiping guiltily at her eyes. "Patrick isn't bothering you, is he?"

"It's fine," Ginny lied. "He was never like that with me, Maggie. It was bad for a couple of days after I went back, and of course he wanted to know where I was for those two days, and I wouldn't tell him I was at your place, or where you were."

"I'm so sorry, Gin, if I'd known..." Maggie apologized for the three hundredth time. "Tim took everything, just everything, I didn't have a choice but to come here."

Ginny waved it away. "Listen, it's just my luck, right? I try to run away from home, then my sister's crackhead husband sells everything she owns and she gets evicted and I have nowhere else to go. What else is new? How is this any different than anything in my life?" Ginny's laugh was grim, and Maggie placed her hand on her sister's arm.

"I know, I pick real winners, don't I?" Maggie snorted. "And you know, we had such a great role model growing up..."

That particular irony forced Ginny's wry smile. Patrick was the only father either of them had known.

"When I get a place, you can come live with me, okay?" Maggie assured her.

“I think I’m going to head out to somewhere warm—California or Florida.”
Ginny’s eyes turned to the horizon. “Find some surfer guy and be a beach bunny.
What do you think?”

“I think it would be a waste.”

“Come on, let’s go play on the swings.” Ginny stood, relenting to the
demanding calls coming their way.

Maggie grabbed her hand as they walked, squeezing. Ginny fought hot,
bitter tears and lost, letting the wind dry them as she ran under Michael’s swing
again and again and again.

Chapter Two

Borders was the perfect place to spend a quiet afternoon sketching. Normally, she would be drawing figures: people browsing books or sitting and drinking coffee in the café. But she was working on something for the boys that needed to be finished before Christmas. The clerk, Robbie, set another tea down for her and she smiled at him gratefully. She wasn't paying for the treats he left on her table, and he was risking a great deal doing it. In the past, he'd even slipped sketch pads and pencils into her bag for her to find later.

"How's it coming?" He slid into the chair beside her. She turned her pad to show him a fair likeness of Wolverine. "Wow," he breathed, sounding truly impressed. "Are you sure you want to waste that as a coloring book for a four year old?"

She just smiled, continuing to sketch, looking now and then at the book in front of her, X-Men Legends Volume III, which she'd pulled earlier from the shelves. She would put it back before she left.

"Break?" She glanced at the counter where a few people were drinking lattes and reading a newspaper or paperback.

"Yep, only five more hours and I'm off for the day," he groaned. "Want to come home with me for a Hungry Man dinner?"

She lifted her eyes to him, seriously tempted. TV dinners sounded fantastic at the moment. The two almond cookies he'd slipped her were just enough to make her stomach remember food. It just came down to not knowing him well enough to trust walking into a man's place alone, even if he was nice to

her. “Hey, that’s the guy who was in here the other day watching you,” Robbie said, in a low voice, giving her a reprieve.

Ginny’s breath caught and she looked up, locating the man over by the philosophy section. Her worries about trusting Robbie suddenly paled in comparison as she stared at the man the clerk had pointed out. He was half-turned away from them now, and she recognized him immediately—his bulk, the way his broad shoulders stretched the fabric of his dark blue winter jacket, the squareness of his chin.

She’d seen him yesterday outside the Shell station, and the day before that, he was at the library where she was looking up comic book characters. Her nagging suspicion that he was a private detective, someone sent by Patrick to follow her, was growing. She started gathering up her things, shoving her sketchbook into her bag.

“Hey, where are you going?” Robbie questioned. “It’s only one o’clock.”

“I know. Can you put this back for me?” She slid the X-Men book across the table toward him. He nodded, watching her pull on her coat and backpack. “I’ll probably see you tomorrow.”

“Probably?”

She shrugged, jerking her head toward the man who had moved down the aisle toward them, into what she assumed was closer hearing distance. She edged her way around the café, walking the furthest perimeter she could, and slipped down a darkened corridor and into the women’s bathroom. Relieved, she saw it was empty.

She went into a stall and struggled to pull all her layers down so she could pee. Her hands were shaking when she washed them at the sink, and she took a few deep breaths, trying to slow her racing heart. She took her ponytail out, smoothed her hair with her hands, peering at her face, noting the beginnings of dark circles under her eyes. Five hours of sleep a night was beginning to take its toll.

Ginny rubbed her hands together under the dryer, telling herself she was trembling because of the temperature in the restroom. She struggled to keep her mind off the man on the other side of the wall... and also off the man who she was sure had hired him to find her.

Patrick had probably just called in some favor. Private detectives were almost always ex-cops, and she could see Patrick calling some buddy that used to be on the force, faking concern about his missing stepdaughter, "She's wild. I'm worried what she could be into. I just want her home safe." In reality, for Patrick, it would be a simple business transaction, just a matter of retrieving his property. Maggie he considered damaged goods, but Ginny was still valuable to him.

Her nails were digging into her palms and she'd bitten her lip so hard it was bleeding. She was safer sleeping on the streets and living out of garbage cans, but no one would believe that. No one ever believed that.

The door opened and she gasped, whirling around, wide-eyed. A mother with a baby in her arms swept into the bathroom, looking almost as tired as

Ginny felt. The woman smiled an apology, taking the baby to the foldout counter to change its diaper.

It was a tiny little baby, and she could remember when Maggie had Sean, how small and delicate he had felt in her arms when she first held him. All throughout Maggie's pregnancy, after she began to show and Patrick had kicked her out, Ginny still hadn't understood Maggie's insistence on having and keeping a baby fathered by a man they both despised and feared. She didn't understand it all the way up until she had held Sean in her arms, looked into those guileless eyes, and understood that it wasn't the baby's fault.

The image of Patrick in her head obliterated all rational thought. Ginny washed her hands again, stalling for time. The young mother was cooing and clucking at her baby as she worked, folding over tabs and refastening snaps. Ginny turned on the dryer, standing there as long as she dared, until her hands were too warm and turning red. She shouldered her backpack and glanced behind her.

The mother was lifting the baby now and kissing her. It was a girl, if the pink giraffe on the sleeper was any indication. Ginny wondered for a moment if anyone had ever held and kissed her that way. She doubted it. Maybe Maggie, three years older than her, had loved her that way once, but it was no substitute for a mother.

Ginny pulled open the door, steeling herself to find him just outside, but the corridor was empty. She edged around the corner, watchful, but didn't see

him. Robbie was behind the counter at the café, back to doling out cappuccinos and biscotti.

She walked toward the exit and she was almost to the door when she realized she'd left her Scrunchie on the bathroom counter. She stopped, vacillating, not wanting to leave it there but desperate for escape. Watching the wind whip the bare branches of trees outside and imagining the hour-long trek back toward the video store, she made her decision.

She turned and hurried back toward the women's bathroom. The young mother was gone, but the black Scrunchie was still there. She snatched at it and started putting her hair back up as she headed out of the bathroom.

Both hands were busy behind her head as she came out of the door, and if she hadn't stopped to tighten the band, she never would have seen him standing in a slanted shadow in the corner. It was the white Borders' bag he was carrying that caught her eye, and there was a moment of déjà-vu and a flicker of a memory stirred before he spoke.

"I didn't mean to scare you." His voice was low and kind, and it startled her on many levels. Her heartbeat quickened when she met his eyes, and found that they seemed strangely kind, as well.

She mumbled, "That's okay," tearing her eyes away and edging toward the exit.

He stepped further into the light and she could see his face, sure now he was the same man she'd seen yesterday, and the day before. He didn't move to

touch her, or speak again, he just watched her, smiling. She felt like a cornered mouse, sitting between a cat's paws.

"Is that yours?" He nodded behind her.

She turned and was horrified to discover her sketchbook lying in front of the bathroom door. She scooped it up, hugging it to her chest. "Thanks." She moved to sail past him and he touched her arm. It was like a jolt and she couldn't help her gasp.

"I'm sorry, I was just wondering, are you an artist?"

As he pried into her life, she could feel her fear changing into something else. Her eyes narrowed, her mouth drew into a small, thin line as she stood and assessed him. He was three times her size at least, but then again, they were in the middle of a bookstore.

"Why don't you ask your buddy the cop about me? He thinks he knows everything!" she hissed and, ignoring the feigned puzzled look on his face, she fled toward the exit, still clinging to her sketchbook.

She had walked fifteen blocks before she remembered it. She stopped to put it away and, this time, she zipped her backpack.

* * * *

She loved the little coffee house. Bright and cheery, it was always packed with people coming and going, ordering coffee and all sorts of sandwiches and pastries. Often enough, patrons would leave in a hurry to make their movie or go dancing at the club, the remainders of their meals and snacks left behind in their rush.

She slid into an empty booth covered with half-eaten plates of food, when she felt him watching her. It wasn't so much seeing him as just knowing, a kind of extrasensory jolt. Her eyes lifted to see him staring at her through the frosted glass window, his wiry frame beginning to thread through the crowd, his uniform parting the tide.

She bolted from the booth and ducked out of the café, trying not to run and attract attention to her flight. He caught her in the alleyway, and she realized her mistake the moment his hand found her throat and pressed her head hard against the brick. There was no one back here, no bright lights, no warm bodies, and no watching eyes. It was cold, dark, and they were completely alone.

"Did you think you could run from me?" Patrick's breath reeked of alcohol and Ginny turned her head, struggling. "Did you really think you could hide?"

She couldn't answer. His hand at her throat made it impossible. He wasn't a big man, but he was tall and wiry, and surprisingly strong. His voice turned smooth as he took his hand from her throat, twisting her arm up behind her, his weight pressing her into the wall.

"I told you, girl." His voice was like slick oil against her ear. "You can't ever hide from me. I own the system. You're a number that shows up wherever you go. I've got eyes everywhere. You rent a motel room, you're mine. You use a credit card, you're mine. Put your name on a lease, you're mine. You get a paycheck, you're mine. Do you understand me? You. Are. Mine."

Ginny felt herself giving in to her fear—no matter what she did, no matter where she ran, he would track her down. Hot tears stung her eyes and she

looked away, down the alley, hoping to see someone, anyone, but there was nothing but darkness. She cursed her hunger, the driving need that brought her into the little café when he happened to be passing by. She nearly gasped out loud at her own realization.

He felt her relenting and let up a little, and he took the opportunity to ask conversationally, “So where is it, Gin? Just give me the tape, and we’ll be done, I promise you.”

“Why didn’t you find me weeks ago?” she taunted. She could feel him startle, could almost hear the frown when he grunted and tightened his grip. “If you’re so smart, so connected...”

“Shut up!” he growled, making her wince when he shoved his knee between hers, pressing her belly into the wall.

“I don’t have it with me,” she lied flatly, aching to hide or ditch her bag somewhere, using all of her force of will to keep still and let its weight dangle from her forearm, as if she could care less. “But if you touch me...if you touch anyone I care about...your face will be all over the news, and this time it won’t be because the mayor is pinning a ribbon to your chest.”

“Bullshit!” He didn’t sound convinced, but she could feel him hesitating, his breath short and struggling in her ear.

“No,” Ginny said, surprising herself with the steel edge in her voice. “You’re the bullshit artist, Patrick. Me, I tell the truth, and I’m telling you the truth right now. Believe it.”

The back door swung open, and Ginny recognized one of the café workers as he brought out a bag of trash. His eyes widened in surprise and he looked concerned, before he saw Patrick's uniform. Ginny knew how much power that uniform had, how it could immediately anesthetize.

"Thank you, Officer," Ginny gasped, using the moment of surprise to twist out of Patrick's grip and head toward the young man still standing agape in the doorway. "You saved my life."

"Hey!" Patrick called, but he was too late. She was already bolting through the busy coffee house and out the front door onto the street.

She ran blindly for blocks, sure she was being pursued, but too afraid to look behind her to check. It was the burning stitch in her side that finally stopped her. She leaned against a streetlamp, doubled over, trying to catch her breath. Patrick was nowhere to be seen.

When she could finally stand upright again, she took her bearings and decided to take the long way back to the video store, just in case. Her heart was racing, her hands were shaking, but she was alive. The exhilaration of that startled her. She had faced him down and had won! She started her walk toward the only home she had, a six by six square that was much less of a cage than anything she'd lived in before.

* * * *

It was one in the morning when she remembered she had food in her pocket, which she'd forgotten in all the excitement earlier. Her stomach thanked her, making all sorts of noises as she drank half of the juice in two swallows, then

dug into the peanut butter. It wasn't the first time that hunger had woken her, that clawing beast crawling deep in her belly, but it was one of the few times she had a little extra food.

The light outside was different, it seemed. Maybe it was just that most nights she was asleep by now, wrapped up in her coat, her head on her backpack, curled as tightly into the corner as she could manage. She had never seen a security or a police car cruise the parking lot, but she didn't want any of her limbs hanging out in line of sight of the doorway. She had learned to be cautious.

When she discovered she had finished half the jar of peanut butter, Ginny put the lid back on and slid it back into her pocket. She washed it down with the last of the juice. She sighed, wrapping her coat around her and curling up in the corner again.

It wasn't easy to get comfortable. The floor was hard and cold, her backpack lumpy. She tried to pack it so that the clothes were on the side where she rested her head. There wasn't ever any getting away from the cold, even bundled up. Her fingers and toes were always freezing, and in the morning, they were stiff and they ached, in fact, her whole body felt that way. Still, her stomach no longer felt like it was eating itself. She was relieved that, for a little while, she might be able to get some peace, just a brief respite, a few hours of sleep.

It came like a strange cross between a memory and a dream. Patrick in his uniform wielding a broom like a nightstick, the closest thing he could find, chasing a pregnant Maggie into a corner and beating her until the handle broke.

Ginny stood frozen in a dream-like paralysis in the doorway, her fear overriding her guilt at not moving to defend her sister. She could hear Maggie screaming, and Patrick was yelling at her to “Get out! Get the fuck out! Get out before the cops come!”

Ginny’s head came up, fuzzy and throbbing upon waking, as if she had been the one being beaten. She understood it was a dream, and realized, too, that the words still echoing in her head, “Get out before the cops come!” weren’t Patrick’s words at all. They were very real, and they were coming from inside the video store.

There were people inside the video store, and they were heading toward the exit—her exit. She could see three of them, their heads bobbing back and forth across the shelves. Ginny moved without thinking, knowing she had to get out of there. She crouched, grabbing her backpack and reaching for the door handle. They were coming now, one of them stopping to punch a security code.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here, Luke! Hurry up!”

Ginny stood, ready to run. There was just no time. A few minutes earlier and she could have been safely in the alleyway behind the buildings. There was no avoiding it, they saw her the minute the door swung open, and everyone stood rigid, the shock of being caught leaving them all stunned and breathless. For a moment, she thought she might faint, but she willed it not to happen.

The tall one broke the spell, hissing, “Go, man! Fucking GO! GO! GO!” They all pushed past her to the exit, knocking her aside.

Her backpack caught onto something one of them was holding. She felt a sharp tug, something gave way, and the guy bringing up the rear gave up the struggle as he continually repeated “She saw us!” as they all fumbled out the door.

It was over as quickly as it had started. She stood for a moment, watching their taillights disappear out of the parking lot, wondering if she had been dreaming. She looked down at her feet and saw what one of them had dropped. She hesitated only a moment before she grabbed it and bolted out the door, running in the opposite direction until the ache in her side forced her to slow.

She didn’t even know where she was. She had run into the neighborhood behind the strip mall, and had made as many turns as she could, hoping that no one was watching or following her. Panting, she sat down on the curb next to a parked car. She leaned her head against the bumper and tried to stop the shaking. She felt faint for a moment, but let the feeling wash over her and pass.

She couldn’t live this way anymore. She had to do something. Anything. No matter where she went, she felt as if the world were closing in on her, as if she really was the trash Patrick always claimed, being compacted into a neat little throwaway piece. She and Maggie had lived under the cloud of Patrick’s view for so long they both believed it was true—they didn’t deserve any better.

But the boys do.

Ginny remembered them this afternoon, a million years ago now, Sean’s sticky hand in hers, Michael’s long legs flailing underneath him on the swing

begging for purchase. She was determined that neither of them would ever know what it would be like to live as human garbage.

The tears came. She swiped at them, but they were coming too fast for her to stop them from falling onto the bag lying between her feet. Her hands were trembling as she picked it up, and without thinking, she pulled the drawstring and looked inside.

“No,” she whispered, feeling instant salvation and damnation settle in the pit of her stomach like an anchor.

There was no denying the reality of what was in the bag. She took it out and counted it there in the glow of a streetlight, and then she counted it again, because it was more cash than she’d ever seen in her lifetime.

Twelve-hundred dollars.

She looked around, but the street retained the early morning quiet that the suburbs often do, house lights dark, blinds closed, a world asleep. Just standing was a struggle, between the exhaustion and the weight that felt as if it had been lodged somewhere beneath her rib cage. She didn’t know how she was going to manage to walk to the shelter in this state.

She was no longer a part of this world where houses were warm, beds were soft and food existed as if by magic in refrigerators. She wanted the boys to be. It was the best Christmas gift she could think of to give them.

She tucked the money deep into her backpack and zipped it, shrugging it on, ignoring the taut ache of her muscles and the numbing exhaustion creeping into her limbs. She walked just to keep moving, unsure of her destination,

following the thought of sleep like an illusion, a mirage she was chasing on some distant moonlit pavement.

Chapter Three

She had just missed the seven-day advanced purchase ticket price. It was a fifty dollar difference that meant she didn't have enough money left over to be able to stay somewhere like the local YWCA, or even the one small youth hostel in the area. She hadn't dared to go back to the video store. Instead, she'd been sleeping in cul-de-sacs and beneath underpasses for the past week.

With the wind whipping up under her long coat, the cold was so pervasive and relentless she shivered in a permanent state of misery. Her normal body temperature had become a constant fever that left her teeth chattering. She longed for the relative warmth that existed between two glass panes, which somehow had come to feel like home.

Ginny had spent many of her days tucked away in a warm corner of the library. In her Internet searches, she had found a support network, a sort of Underground Railroad that would help her escape Patrick's long reach. It was an entire network that could hide her, even provide her with a new identity, if she wanted one. He may not be able to trace her easily in the city, but she couldn't afford the chance of running into him or his cronies on the streets. California was as far away as she could imagine. It meant a cross-country trip, but she would finally be free.

She had headed over to do some more research about the San Francisco Art Institute and the possibility of financial aid, but she had forgotten the library was closed on Christmas Eve. Now, she found herself out on the street again before it was even dark, facing an hour walk back to town.

Maggie was expecting Ginny tomorrow morning, where she would spend Christmas day with her family for the last time in who knew how long. Then she would board a Greyhound bus for California. All that was left was the little detail of telling Maggie and the boys she was leaving.

Last night, she had slept in the recessed doorway of the high school only a few blocks away from Maggie's new place on Fourth Street, choosing a door that faced away from the road. She spent most of the night awake, worrying about the possibility of being found and fantasizing about the relief of the video store around the corner.

She knew she had been lucky with the unseasonable warmth, but she had heard a weather report this morning that foretold temperatures tonight dropping well below freezing with the possibility of snow. This portent arrived as she trudged her way back into town, walking down a street in a small downtown area lined with fun little shops where people were taking their very last opportunity to buy gifts.

A little girl was standing in front of the bakery holding some sort of cinnamon bun that made Ginny's stomach clench. The child turned to the woman next to her and cried, "Mommy, look, it's snowing!" The tone was one Ginny remembered echoing like some distant memory, that awed and giddy voice which made anything around Christmas sound magical.

Ginny looked up and saw small white flakes floating against the light of one of the lampposts. The town's holiday decorations, a candy cane and two

silver bells flocked by evergreen branches, were just starting to gather the first bit of white dust.

The little girl had her tongue out, trying to catch the larger flakes, and her mother smiled indulgently. The woman caught Ginny watching them and commented, “Perfect timing for Christmas, isn’t it?” before she steered her daughter out of the way of shoppers and they made their way down the street.

What was perfect timing for everyone else’s holiday felt like a warped and unjust act of god to Ginny. Her very last night sleeping out in the cold, and now there was the added insult of snow! As she watched the mother and daughter pair retreat, something heavy settled in her belly, a pain that went deeper than hunger.

Her indecision stopped her at the intersection. Where was she going to spend the night? She glanced back at the street scene—traffic crawling, cars looking for places to park, people milling between stores, their gloved hands clutching packages or bags. It reminded her of a snow globe she had as a kid, one of those cheap plastic things you shook in order to watch the snow fall on a city street.

She smiled at the memory. Maggie had given her that funny little globe, the one that looked so odd and stilted with all the snow gathered in clumps on the bottom. Still, in those few seconds when everything turned upside down and then righted again, when those unidentifiable little white pellets floated through liquid in a sweet simulation of snow falling, everything seemed right with the world. Ginny found herself feeling homesick.

Maggie had asked her to come spend Christmas Eve with them, but she had refused. She knew if she spent even one night with them, she would never want to leave. It would just sap her courage and urgency to get on the bus tomorrow night.

That wasn't the only reason, of course. The main reason was she was being followed, and she didn't want to lead Patrick anywhere near Maggie's new place. Putting herself in danger was one thing, but putting them all at risk was something else altogether.

The decision weighed heavily on her as she stood on the street corner and watched the snow fall. She knew if she went left, she wouldn't end up at the high school but rather on her sister's doorstep. She just couldn't do that. Eyeing the coffee house across the street to her right, she knew it closed late, even on Christmas Eve. It would kill some time and allow her to sketch for a while. Just down the street from the cafe, she was drawn to the promise of a warm, safe night tucked in the vestibule at the video store that had closed for the holiday hours ago.

If she couldn't have the nestled calm of Maggie's home, the video store felt like the next best thing. It had been a week since the robbery, and the memory of it seemed distant compared to the ache she was feeling for something, anything, familiar. She made her decision, turning right, and noticing that enough snow had already fallen for her to leave footprints behind her as she headed to the coffee house.

* * * *

With great relief, she settled into her spot on the floor of the vestibule much earlier than usual. Fatigue crept into her joints and bones as the warmth began to thaw her limbs. She had no worries about being disturbed tonight because the sign on the door read: "Christmas Eve 10am-5pm. Closed Christmas Day."

She stretched out onto her back and watched the snow falling even more heavily now. Her bus ticket was tucked away in her pocket, and although she dreamed about warm beaches and sunshine, she felt a bit sad that this might be the last snowfall she saw for a very long time.

It seemed impossible that a Christmas Eve alone and homeless, watching it snow from the entrance of a video store, was preferable to the night spent at the place she had always known as home. But when she thought of this day last year, she knew she had a lot to be grateful for tonight.

When Patrick had dragged her from her bed in the middle of the night, she found herself looking up through the branches of the little tabletop tree she had decorated in an attempt to make some semblance of a normal Christmas. She wondered how she ever could have believed in something as benevolent as Santa Claus. She was getting the only gift she would get from her stepfather that year, as he knelt between her legs while Steve, his partner, forced himself into her mouth. Merry fucking Christmas, sweetheart.

There was the hope that now she had escaped, her life could unfold, and she clung to that. The envelope in her pocket was the ticket to a freedom she could only begin to imagine. She felt a greater anticipation tonight than she had

ever felt on any Christmas Eve before, her whole body tingling with it as she watched the magic of the first real snowfall of the year, remembering the snow globe and how you had to turn the world upside down to make it snow.

Her whole world had turned upside down, but all was right somehow. She felt something filling her, something she very seldom felt, a novel belief that something good was coming. Perhaps it was just the promise of this night, the weighted expectation of Christmas Eve. Her blood sang with it every year, and it was operatic now, filled with something beyond the feeling she had when she was young and thought she might glimpse Santa leaving something in their stockings.

And yet somehow she was surprised, but no more shocked this Christmas Eve than she was during the last, when a door opened and the safety of her universe collapsed under the weight of a man. There were two of them, and she recognized the tall one right away, the one who had punched in the security code. The other had a jacket she recognized, black with blue stripes.

Her quick instincts might have saved her if it hadn't been for the length of her own coat. She was up and had the door open before they were on her, but one of them stepped on the hem and she was brought up short. It was just long enough for him to grab her by the arm and twist her back into the vestibule, pressing her hard against the glass. It was the tall one. She could see his reflection, although her breath was beginning to fog it enough for it to be unclear.

“Where’s our fucking money, bitch?” he demanded, pulling her toward him only to shove her back hard again, her cheek pressed onto the cold surface of the glass. She gasped but didn’t say anything—she knew it wouldn’t matter.

“Look through her bag, idiot,” he urged his friend in the blue/black coat, who then yanked it off her shoulder. She could see his reflection pulling out clothes, her sketchpad, her toiletries, tossing them aside.

“Nothing,” blue/black coat said, tossing her bag into the corner. “Hold her.”

Ginny closed her eyes against his hands digging into her coat pockets, pulling out a bus ticket, twenty dollars in cash, and a Scrunchie.

“Well, she spent some of it on this,” blue/black coat showed the tall one her bus ticket, then shoved it, and the cash, into his pocket.

“You gonna skip town with our money? Where is it?” The tall one twisted her arm tighter.

Ginny felt herself leaving, floating somewhere above them, gone somehow, nowhere near her body in that moment. She couldn’t have answered him if she wanted to. She knew it was only a matter of time, and she was right.

The tall one spun her around, snatching her coat off and throwing it over her bag. “Maybe she’s got it hidden somewhere under all this.”

Their hands were on her now, pulling, pushing, leaving her cold and trembling, stripping her down. The floating, observant part of her was bemused at their frustration with all her extra layers of clothing.

“Told you she wouldn’t still have it.” Blue/black coat eyed her shivering form in jeans and t-shirt.

“Haven’t checked everywhere.” The tall one grunted as he unzipped and tried to shove her jeans down her hips over her leggings. “Come on, help me.”

Blue/black coat took over the tugging, and their hands were on her, searching, probing. It was when the tall one turned her around and pressed her into the glass again, and blue/black coat pulled her leggings down to her knees, that the disembodied part of herself came home and, finding her voice, she flailed and screamed at them.

The tall one clamped his hand over her mouth, using his other arm across her midsection to pull her in tight against him, crushing the air out of her. “You better shut up,” he warned.

Feeling him pressed against her behind, she knew what it was and what he intended to do with it. She was still screaming, but nothing was coming out. She bit down hard on his hand, and he swore, shoving her head hard enough against the glass it created a small spider web crack. Seeing blackness, then stars in the blackness, it was only then that she felt the pain, exploding through her head like white-hot fireworks.

Moaning, she heard one of them say something about getting her, teaching her. Her ears were ringing, her head on fire. There was a tugging, a ripping, her panties gone, then she was being bent over. Her voice resurfaced and she found herself screaming again.

“Shut her up!” blue/black coat hissed, then someone hit her hard across the mouth and she tasted blood.

Still, she couldn't stop screaming, and the hand came again, this time in the form of a fist. It felt as if something in her head rattled loose with that hit and the voice stopped. Everything stopped. Sound receded. Light faded. She was sinking, falling, dying, and all she could feel was relief and gratitude.

"The cops!" Blue/black coat yelled and the tall one dropped her.

She crumpled to her knees.

They bolted out the opposite door into the snow, but she didn't see them, just heard them. She was dry heaving onto the floor—there was nothing in her stomach to come up, but she was convulsing as if there were.

She was aware of boots, the familiar blue uniform. Large hands were holding her hair back as she trembled and heaved, murmuring something unintelligible. She turned her head to look and her heart sank when she saw him, the same man she had seen in the library, at Borders, in the 7-Eleven.

"I knew you were a cop," she croaked before slipping into a blissful, empty and painless darkness.

Chapter Four

She woke up floating on a cloud, her body aching but resting on something so soft it was unimaginable. Her eyes focused and she realized she must be in someone's home. She was lying on a sofa and there was a television, a coffee table, all the usual living room amenities, along with a Christmas tree in the corner and one stocking hung on the fireplace mantle. She could hear someone talking and, for a moment, couldn't remember anything that had happened.

"Yeah, I have her here now. I'm gonna see if I can get her to come in without any hassle," he was saying.

She sat bolt upright, suddenly remembering everything.

She scanned the room for her backpack and coat and found them in a corner. The world slipped a little as she stood. Steadying herself on the arm of a chair, she moved toward her things. She had to get out of here before Patrick showed up.

The stranger had moved further into the kitchen and his voice was muffled now. She strained to hear. Was he calling more cops? Worse, was he calling Patrick? She shivered, sure it was the latter as she shrugged on her coat and shouldered her backpack, easing toward the front door.

"Hey! Hey there! Hold on!"

She heard him call out as she turned the knob. She pulled, but found the deadbolt locked.

He caught up to her in three quick strides, and as she unlocked the deadbolt and pulled open the door, he pressed his hand flat against it and shut it again. "Where do you think you're going?"

She moved around him, starting toward the kitchen. "Anywhere but here!"

"Listen, you have to stay." He caught up to her again, moving in front of her and blocking the entryway with his body.

"Like hell I do!" She shoved at him, but it was like trying to move a brick wall, and her head and mouth throbbed with the effort. "What for? So you and Patrick can finish what those two started? I don't think so, asshole! Now get out of my way!"

"Patrick? Who the hell is Patrick?" The genuine look of confusion on his face stopped her for a moment.

"Do they give you acting lessons in private dick school?" she snarled, turning away from him and running toward the front door.

"We can't keep doing this running thing all night." Exasperated, he caught up with her again, stepping in front of the door before she could reach it.

"Then get out of my way."

"What are you running from? What are you running to?"

She swallowed hard, her throat burning, her voice shaking. "If you had any idea what I was running from, you never would've told him where I am. Now get out of my way, before I call the real cops!" She ducked under his arm, pulling at the door, but was no match for the weight of him pressed against it.

“Listen to me!” He grabbed her arms and pulled her toward him. “I’m trying to help you. That’s all I want to do!”

“If you want to help, then let me go,” she pleaded. “Please, whatever he’s told you, none of it is true. You can’t let him find me. I’m begging you.”

The tears were coming and she couldn’t stop them, although she tried hard. She even bit down on her bruised and swollen lip, hoping the pain might be a distraction.

He shook his head at her. “Who? What are you talking about?”

“Oh, come on, you know who!” She pulled away from him and ran, she didn’t care anymore where to. “The guy you were just talking to on the phone!”

This time when he reached her, he enfolded her, wrapping his arms around her from behind, grabbing her wrists and crossing them over. He held her that way for some time, not speaking, just waiting for her to stop struggling. When her breath began to slow a little and she relaxed against his bulk, he spoke, “I’m going to tell you something, and I want you to listen. Then I’m going to ask you a question, and you’re going to answer me. Do you understand?”

He waited for her to nod, which she did reluctantly, before going on.

“My name is Nick Santos. I’m a real cop, not a private detective. The phone call was to the station about the assault I’d just witnessed. Did you see my badge? I assure you it’s quite real. You can call them back to check it out if you want to.”

She relaxed a little at these words, not sure what to believe.

"I live in the house behind the video store and I know you've been sleeping there for the past few weeks," he revealed.

She let that information sink in, not knowing if she could or should trust what he was saying.

"Now...who is Patrick?"

"You really don't know?" she asked, her voice small. She felt him sigh.

"I know nothing about you except that you're obviously a runaway with nowhere to go. You're clearly very afraid of something...or someone...and you seem to like the peanut butter and apple juice I left out for you."

She gasped, flushing, and she knew what he was saying had to be true. It all came at her, everything, the weeks alone, the terror of believing Patrick was looking for her, having her followed, the harsh words and hard hands. It came with so much force she was gasping and then sobbing, collapsing as if someone had just cut her strings.

He gathered her up and sat with her on the sofa, and she found herself clinging to him, desperate for someone who might be able to offer even just a little comfort.

"Who is Patrick?" he asked her again, and she found herself telling him, in small bursts, about her stepfather and his abuse.

"So you ran away?" He was stroking her hair and she found herself sinking against him, nodding. "And you thought I was someone he hired to find you?"

She nodded again, closing her eyes, feeling more comfortable here in this man's arms than she had anywhere in a very long time.

He took a deep breath, and then he said something she had never heard a man say in her life, "Well, you're safe now. I won't let anyone hurt you."

She put her arms around him, feeling a warmth and easiness that should have taken years to accomplish, given her justifiable tendency toward mistrust. "Thank you."

He sighed again, his hand still in her hair. "What's your name?"

"Virginia... Ginny."

He leaned back to look at her, and she saw something in his eyes that stopped her, some internal struggle that put her on edge. "Well, Ginny..." He cleared his throat. "I'm going to have to ask you to come into the police station to make a report."

He said it as if he knew what her response would be. She leapt out of his lap, practically hissing.

"Okay, okay," he conceded, encircling her wrists with his hands and pulling her back toward him. "I'll tell you what. You stay here tonight."

She looked down at him, suspicious.

"You can have a bath and I'll make you something to eat," he said, tempting her. "And I have a guest room. Then tomorrow, we'll talk about going in and reporting this, okay?"

"Patrick's a cop," she reminded him. "The minute my name is in any system, I'm dead."

He nodded sympathetically.

“They took my bus ticket to California and the only money I had to my name.” She sank into the chair opposite him, the realization finally hitting her. All of her dreams of California and art school had vanished in one five-minute struggle. “I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“It’s going to be okay,” he assured her, his hand swallowing hers as he helped her to stand.

For some reason beyond her comprehension, looking into his quiet, dark eyes, she believed him.

* * * *

After weeks of bathing in a bathroom sink, Ginny moaned out loud when she slid into a full, hot tub of water. Nick had insisted on the compromise of taking Polaroid pictures of her face before he gave her towels and let her into the bathroom. She didn’t know how long she spent soaking after she’d washed everything three times, including her hair. She may have even slept a little in the heat, starting out of her daze when she heard him knocking.

“Hey, food’s ready,” he called through the door.

“Give me just a minute.” She reached for the towel.

“If you want, leave your clothes and I’ll throw them in the machine,” he told her. “There’s a shirt on the door that should cover you. Come down when you’re ready.”

“Okay.” She pulled the plug and let the bath water start to drain.

Wrapped in a towel, she inspected her face. Her lip was swollen and blue on one side, and she had a bruise already on the same side of her cheek that looked as if it might grow darker. The lump on the left side of her forehead hurt the most. It was the size of a quarter, red in the center and purple at the edges.

She towel-dried her hair as best she could and found the white button down shirt he had left hanging on the door. It was enormous and came to her knees. She debated about a bra and panties or leggings for a moment, and decided to let him wash everything and just wear the shirt.

“Nick?” She found him setting the table in the kitchen.

He was still in his uniform and just looking at him in it brought a tangled combination of feeling, apprehension and security. She smiled at him, anyway. “I’m starving!”

He stood frozen, forks and napkins halted in midair, looking at her wearing his shirt and standing framed by the doorway. Ginny glanced down and noticed her still-wet hair was leaving little see-through patches on the material in places and saw the lustful look in his eyes. It made her flush and she could feel a low heat burning below the hunger in her belly.

“What’d you make?” She decided to brazen it out and walked toward him, where he still stood, as if transfixed. She cocked her head at him and met his eyes. There was more than kindness in them now, she noticed, although he looked quickly away, as if he wanted to hide his feelings.

Clearing his throat, he managed to answer her, “Spaghetti. Have a seat.”

She did, her stomach growling at the smell and thought of food. She'd discovered hunger was interesting in that way. There were times when the stomach seemed to forget for a while that it hadn't been satisfied, but the sight or smell of something could bring that instant gnarl and clench again.

She was ravenous and devoured it all, an entire plate of pasta and sauce, and her own roll with butter and half of his. He watched her as he chewed thoughtfully. She thought he looked preoccupied with something, but she was so engrossed in satisfying her own senses that she didn't care.

It was only when her belly was full that thoughts began again, and she asked him, "So, it's Christmas Eve...where's your family? You live alone here?"

His smile was strained and she didn't realize until that moment how callous her question might have been. "My mother is dead. My father and I don't speak. I moved in here with someone, but it didn't work out, so she moved out." He shrugged. "Now I spend most holidays working, actually. It pays good overtime. I worked today."

"So why don't you talk to your father? Do you have anything for dessert?" She ran the two questions together and he laughed.

"He's a cop. My father," he clarified, his jaw tightening. "My grandfather was a cop, too, a great one. My father, well...he's like your stepfather. One of those cops who thinks he's above the law." Nick stood. "I have some Ben and Jerry's, I think. Want me to check?"

She nodded, contemplating this new information. "So, are you a good cop?"

“Yes,” he replied matter-of-factly, his head in the freezer. “To a fault, I’m told.” He held up two containers. “Do you want Chunky Monkey or Phish Food?”

“Oh, you are a god!” She clapped her hands in delight, her eyes lighting up. “Some of both!”

He smiled shyly, and she found him so endearing in that moment, watching him take down two bowls and pull out spoons. She started clearing the table, taking their dishes to the sink while he scooped the ice cream.

They settled on the sofa with their bowls, and Ginny let each bite of cold, creamy sweetness melt in her mouth, her eyes closing in delight. He watched her with a very similar expression on his face.

“Nice TV.” She nodded toward the big screen, trying to make conversation.

“Yeah, it was her idea to buy it,” he admitted with a shrug, finding the remote and flicking it on. Ginny realized he’d mistaken her comment as a hint. “But I don’t use it much. Not a lot of time to watch, really...”

“Hey, It’s a Wonderful Life!” she exclaimed through a mouthful of ice cream.

Nick smiled, his eyes lingering on her mouth, where she licked a bit of chocolate off her lower lip. “I’m beginning to think it might be.”

“Don’t you love this movie?” She felt his eyes on her like a heat and turned her attention to the screen instead. Her skin tingled, as if his gaze had touched her flesh. “I haven’t seen it in years. When I was little, somehow it never felt like Christmas unless I saw it at least once.”

“It’s a classic,” he agreed. “My mom and I watched it every year.”

Ginny sucked thoughtfully on her spoon as the opening credits began to run. “Mine, too.”

“Well, then, let’s you and me do Christmas right for a change,” he said, standing up with conviction. “Who wants popcorn?”

Ginny’s eyes brightened. “With butter?”

“At least a stick,” he replied with a grin. “Cholesterol and triglycerides be damned!”

He was in the kitchen before she could say a word. In spite of her reservations and the strange, even surreal, unfolding events of the night, she found herself more comfortable here than she had been in a long time—perhaps ever.

The movie was just starting, the familiar music somehow like opening a floodgate. It brought back instant memories of Christmases when she and Maggie, as young girls, had snuggled together against their mother as they watched the old angel try to get his wings. That was before Patrick.

She was lost in her memories, drifting, her eyes even closing a little as she listened to the lull of popcorn popping in the kitchen. It was the smell of it wafting into the room that made her lift her head to see Nick coming back with a huge bowl. He set it between them on the couch. Ginny let her fingers slip into the buttery fluff, bringing some to her mouth. Nick watched her, looking pleased.

“Thank you,” she murmured after a moment, glancing over at him.

“Popcorn’s easy,” he replied with a shrug, his hand brushing hers in the bowl.

Ginny nudged him with her elbow. “No...not the popcorn.”

“You’re welcome. Now, eat! My mother would turn over in her grave if I didn’t live up to my heritage some day by using that phrase. Am I right?”

She laughed, curling her feet under her and digging into the bowl. The movie was long, and they didn’t talk much, but their hands brushed every now and then when they reached for more buttery goodness. Ginny found herself drifting again, lost in her memories of childhood Christmases.

“She’s happy with so little,” Nick murmured, startling her out of her reverie.

“Who?” She looked thoughtfully at Donna Reed welcoming Jimmy Stewart “home” to a broken-down old house on their wedding night.

“I don’t know.” He shook his head. “I guess I’m just so used to dating women who want the big house and the expensive car and everything else that goes with it. It’s not who a guy is, anymore—it’s what he does, and more importantly, how much money he makes doing it.”

“No,” she replied, meeting his eyes. “All of that...it’s just stuff. Sure, it’s nice, but it’s really not what matters.”

He leaned his head back on the couch, his eyes searching her face.

“You’re really something, you know that?”

She shrugged. “I’m nothing special.”

“No, you’re wrong.” His voice changed, growing firmer. “And I wish more people in your life had told you so.”

“I’ve got enough people in my life telling me I’m wrong, thank you very much,” she quipped.

He smiled, reaching out to touch her bruised cheek, rubbing it gently with his thumb. “You know what I mean.”

She glanced from him to the screen. His eyes were soft when they met hers, questioning even. They made her feel warm all over. He turned slightly toward her, and the light of the television glinted off his badge. Her eyes lingered there, then moved up to his face again. With her associations, it was hard for her to reconcile the two. Yet here he was, wearing the same uniform and yet so very different from Patrick.

“The thing about her is...” Ginny started, her eyes flicking from him to the television. “She knows a good thing when she sees it.”

“You think so?” His thumb moved over her jaw.

“Yes,” she insisted, although her eyes were on him, now, not on the couple on the screen. “There aren’t many men who would offer a girl the moon.”

Nick surprised her by doing a Jimmy Stewart impression, stutter and all: “What is it you want, Mary? What do you want? You want the moon? Just say the word and I’ll throw a lasso around it and pull it down.”

“I’ll take it,” Ginny quoted, smiling at him.

“I wish I could give it to you.”

She held her breath as he leaned forward, brushing the hair away from her face so his lips could touch her forehead. Everything inside of her went silent.

“You’re very sweet.” She wasn’t surprised to hear her voice trembling and slightly hoarse.

“Are you done with this?” he asked, breaking the mood and nodding at the popcorn bowl. He set it aside when she didn’t reply. Putting his arm across the back of the couch behind her, they settled back again to watch the movie.

By the time George Bailey was delivering his own line about moons and lassos, Nick’s arm was around her shoulder, and Ginny’s head was resting against his chest. It seemed natural and easy, somehow.

She didn’t know if it was the amount of food her body wasn’t used to digesting, or just the overwhelming weariness, but she found herself relaxed enough to even start drifting off to sleep in his arms.

“Come on,” he said, nudging her.

She looked at the screen, blinking, and protested. “But he hasn’t gotten his wings yet...”

He smiled. “I’m sorry, but you aren’t going to make it, angel.”

Her body knew he was right, and she followed him, already anticipating the extravagant comfort of a bed for the first time in weeks. It was a full-sized bed, nothing fancy, plain white sheets and a plaid comforter. It was a man’s taste.

He pulled the covers down for her. “You know where the bathroom is, right? My room is past the bathroom at the end of the hall if you need anything. Okay?”

She nodded, her body slipping between the sheets, and she sighed and moaned at the luxurious pleasure of it. Her eyes closed of their own volition, and she whispered, "Thank you, oh, thank you," as he turned off the light.

He stepped out and started to close the door, but the impending darkness made her open her eyes again.

"Nick?" she called, her voice plaintive.

"Yes?" he asked, peering back in.

She couldn't form the words, but she wanted to. Instead, she just whispered, "Good night."

"Good night."

In spite of her hesitation, she was drifting off to sleep before the door clicked closed.

* * * *

"Ginny?" It was Nick, whispering. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," she whispered back, her head coming up off the pillow, disoriented.

"You were crying. Are you sure?"

"I was?" She put her hands to her cheeks. They were damp. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

"I just wanted to make sure you're okay..."

"I guess." She drew a shaky breath and stared up at the ceiling.

"Yeah...I'm okay."

"Well...goodnight then." Nick went to close the door.

“Wait.” She found the light spilling in from the hallway inviting, and his presence comforting. He stood, waiting.

“Would you...?” She took a deep breath. “Could you sit with me...until I fall asleep?”

“Sure,” he replied, moving back into the room.

He pulled a soft chair from the corner up next to the bed, and she settled back down under the covers. The sound of his breathing was comforting, and she noticed how his bulk filled the chair, how he filled out his uniform, so unlike Patrick’s wiry frame. Thinking about Patrick and the events of the night made her restless again.

“Nick,” she whispered, looking to see if he was asleep.

“Hm?”

“I should tell you something.” She didn’t know why she said it, but there it was. He didn’t respond, just waited, his breathing deep and even in the darkness. “I have something that Patrick wants.”

“What’s that?” Nick asked when she didn’t continue.

“It’s a videotape.” Her hand instinctively reached for the bag next to the bed that was never more than an arm’s reach away anymore. She could feel his silence, waiting for her to go on.

“I was doing a project,” she explained. “It was this multimedia thing for art class. I borrowed a video camera from my teacher, and I was going to do this whole...never mind, that part doesn’t matter...” She took a deep breath, remembering her own discovery that night. “Patrick and his partner and this

stranger showed up and kicked me out. I just left the tape running... He...he gets mad when I don't do what he wants, like, right away..."

Nick exhaled slowly in the darkness. "What did you see when you looked at the tape?"

"The other guy was a dealer," she whispered, closing her eyes, the darkness giving her more courage to tell him.

"Go on."

"They argued. There was a fight." The silence stretched, and she knew she had to tell him now. "And...Patrick killed him."

"You have that on tape?" Nick asked, the soft tone of his voice never changing.

"There was a knife...in Patrick's hand...and the blood...so much blood..." shivered at the memory.

"He knows you have it?"

"I told him," she admitted, her face burning at the memory. "The day I left, I told him if he came after me, I'd take it to some news station..."

Nick let out a low whistle. "I'm surprised he didn't kill you, too."

"I ran." She curled up under the covers.

"I'm glad he didn't catch you."

"Me, too," she sighed. "Anyway, I just thought you should know..."

"Thank you for telling me."

It grew quiet again, and she tossed and turned on the bed, wondering what he was thinking.

He sighed. "Ginny, I need you to give me that tape."

Her eyes grew wide at the thought, gasping, "No!"

"I understand that you're scared," he went on. "But what Patrick did..."

"You don't understand," she insisted, sitting up and pulling the covers up to her chin. "You can't give that tape to the cops! Patrick is a cop!"

"I know," he said, his voice soft, soothing. "But not all cops are like him. You can trust me, Ginny. I won't give it to the wrong people. I'll give it to someone who will use it to punish him to the fullest extent of the law, I promise you. Can you trust me?"

She drew a shaky breath, burrowing back under the covers again. "I don't know."

"It's okay. Let's talk about it in the morning."

In spite of her fear of handing over the tape, she felt like a weight had been lifted off her chest. Telling Nick had been a huge relief.

She remembered opening her eyes a few times, seeing him sitting there in the semi-darkness, hearing his breathing become deeper. She wondered if he were falling asleep, too. Finally, she sank deep enough that her whole body relaxed in ways she could barely remember.

* * * *

She was cold. Shivering. He had found her hiding place and she was running from him, barefoot in the snow. She gasped herself awake in the semi-darkness, not remembering where she was. When she saw his uniformed figure standing over her, she pedaled backwards on the bed, clutching the headboard

as if she could escape from him behind it. He was coming for her, and she knew only how to scream.

“Shhhhhh, Ginny, it’s okay. It’s me. It’s Nick. You’re dreaming,” he murmured, trying to unclench her hands, attempting to hold her.

She struck out, twisting in his arms, panicked and kicking.

“Hey! Hey!” His voice was firm and he shook her at the shoulders.

Her glassy eyes could only see the silver glint of his badge in the darkness. She tore at him, saying the useless words, “No, no, no!” He was much bigger than she was, much stronger, and as always, there was nothing she could do. He pinned her, for both their sakes, pressing her hands above her head and holding them at the wrists.

“Ginny! It’s me. It’s Nick!”

She saw him then, and sobbed. “The uniform. Nick, take it off!”

He pulled back, quizzical, then she saw the dawning compassion in his eyes. He sat back on the bed, unbuttoning his shirt and tossing it over a chair, badge and all. “Better?”

She nodded, her lower lip still trembling.

“It’s okay,” he assured her, holding his arms out. “Do you want to come here?”

Hesitating, she looked at him, then over at the uniform resting on the chair. Just like Patrick’s, and yet...she knew this wasn’t the same man.

“I won’t hurt you,” he said, as if sensing her conflict. “I just want to hold you.”

“I’m so tired,” she whispered, feeling tears welling again. She was tired—tired of running, tired of Patrick winning. Mostly, she was tired of being so afraid all of the time. Nick touched her hair, brushing it out of her face, his touch soft and gentle.

“You can rest,” he murmured. “You’re safe. I’m here.”

Never had a man, especially one wearing that uniform, made her feel safe, but she realized he did. She could trust him, and if she let her own intuition guide her, instead of her fear, she knew it was true. Denying that was just like letting Patrick win again, and she was determined not to let that happen anymore.

“Hold me.” She found her way to him across the bed, curling into his lap and shivering there.

He did, close, closer, trying to enfold her as she trembled against him.

“Take this off,” she insisted, tugging at his belt. He looked startled for a moment, but complied, letting his uniform pants join his shirt on the chair.

She burrowed against him as if desperate for warmth, desperate for something, and he sat on the bed, holding her in his lap.

“Don’t let go.” Her cheek was against his shoulder, and she straddling him now, wrapping herself around him as much as she could.

“No.” He made a small noise in his throat when she squeezed her legs around him.

Her tears made fast, salty trails down her cheeks, stinging her split and swollen lip. He cupped her face in his hands and kissed down the wet pathway to

the corner of her mouth, and she sensed him watching for a response from her. She felt something give inside of her at his gentle urgency, a heart-rending rift along an undiscovered fault line. She half-moaned, half-sobbed, turning her mouth fully into his, tasting her own tears and blood and feeling raw. She kissed him back. Her body's desire gave her no choice.

His hand went behind her neck, his fist in her hair pulling her head sideways, slanting her mouth across his at a delicious angle as his other hand slid up her thigh, over her hip, and around her bottom, pressing her more exactly against his crotch. She gasped, feeling the throbbing hardness there, separated from her heat by only a pair of boxers and the tail ends of the shirt she was wearing. She couldn't help rocking against him, her mouth leaving and finding his again with every movement, forward and back, her eyes closed tight. His large hands cupped her bottom now, moving her, guiding her slow grinding hips. His tongue was trailing down her neck, making her gasp and sigh. She tilted to give him better access.

He slowed a little and she opened her eyes to meet his in the dimness, seeing a question there. He opened his mouth to speak, but she pressed her hand against his lips, murmuring the words, "Yes, yes," as she feathered kisses over his jaw and neck.

He groaned, rolling her onto her back on the bed, his hands seeking her soft, warm places under the long shirt she was wearing. She was greedy, squirming underneath him as he fumbled with her shirt, tugging at his boxers

and, frustrated by the elastic, she simply slipped in through the front, finding him hard and throbbing.

He growled, her tiny hand and jerky movements under the material making him thrust against her. He tore at the front of her shirt, not hesitating to pop the last three buttons in his haste. She took the weight of him, wrapping her legs around him as tight as she could manage.

She clung to him as if she couldn't get enough, as if there would never be enough, and he let her. He left wet trails with his mouth and tongue over the swells of her breasts, grazing her hardening pink nipples with his teeth, making her shudder beneath him. His mouth moved down her belly while his hands kneaded her breasts, rolling the nipples in his fingers as he eased lower, between her legs. She whimpered, his breath warm on her thighs.

"Wet!" He sounded delighted. Nick slipped a finger between her lips, then spread her open with his thumb and forefinger to expose her soft, pink folds.

She moaned as his mouth covered her flesh, his tongue flat and moving slowly back and forth. It was like flying, her body was gliding and she could only go along for the ride, his tongue moving in ways that shifted the currents, guiding her in higher, tighter spirals. She was dizzy with the sensation, and she raked her nails over his shoulders and through his hair. He groaned against her clit when she did, and that sent an immediate jolt straight up her spine.

"Nick, please," she begged, sliding her nails down his biceps, over his forearms. "I want you. Please. I want you." Her hands were urgent, tugging, pulling at him. His face was wet with her as he kissed her thighs, her belly.

“Hungry little thing.” He gave in to her desperation, sliding one knee between hers, seeking her mouth. She could taste herself on his tongue.

“Yes.” She tugged at the last vestige of fabric between them. “Starving.” He helped her slide his boxers down his hips and thighs. “I want you to fill me.”

“I will,” he promised, sliding his hand back down to her mound, grinding his palm there, his fingers playing hide and seek just at the opening of her wet little hole.

She moaned, thrusting upwards, aching for more. He slid his cock against her, rubbing it through wet folds and she moaned, opening her thighs wider and looking up at him with a hopeful expression on her face. He seemed to be re-thinking things, and he moved onto his back, pulling her on top of him. She kissed him, eager and warm and full of craving, reaching behind her to grasp his shaft, already wet from the brief but slippery run through her slit.

Her hand moved on him, and her nipples grazed his chest as she rocked. Her eyes locked with his and seemed to push his desire toward her own ravenousness. He put his hands behind his head, looking up at her, his eyes dark with lust.

“It’s all yours, Ginny. Take it.”

Her eyes widened, and she cocked her head to one side for a moment, hesitant. He closed his eyes and waited. She straddled him, in a full squat, watching the pulse and throb of him between her legs.

“Ohhh... oh, oh,” she cried out as she rubbed the tip of him against her clit.

His eyes were still closed, but his breath was coming a little faster, his eyelids fluttering. She sank to her knees, and then slid him, slowly, past her swollen lips and into her flesh, feeling the length of him filling her, until the tip of his cock seemed to pulse at the very center of her. He let out a slow breath, his eyes half opening to see her sitting up proudly on him, and he smiled.

Her movements were hesitant at first, and then they became a slow and easy exploration of sensation, moving first right, then left, forward, back, feeling the shift of him inside of her depths. He didn't touch her, just watched her moving on him, his eyes studying her face as she discovered her own rhythm. She soon began rocking keenly, her appetite deepening, her yearning growing fierce and wild as she rode him. His hands found her then, one on her hip to steady her, the other sliding a thumb between her lips to strum her clit, making her moan and throw her head back in complete abandon.

"Yesssss, good," he encouraged her when she cupped her breasts in her hands, her fingers rubbing lightly over her nipples.

Her eyes were half-closed and she could only make out the shadow of him beneath her. He was thrusting up into her now and she slowed her own movements, letting him rock her, knead and press and mold her, his easy rhythm slowly flooding her with feeling. "Don't stop."

"No," he agreed, and she felt that easy, pleasant, mellow feeling located somewhere in her belly begin to swell deliciously as he pressed deeply into her, his thumb moving in faster and faster circles on her clit. "Are you ready, sweetheart?"

She gasped, nodded, and closed her eyes. Her fingers pinched her nipples hard now as those sweet waves of pleasure began to roll, fluttering pulses that seemed to pull him deeper inside of her and then unfurl outward through her limbs, leaving her floating, drifting, flying.

She collapsed onto him, shivering at the touch of his hands moving lightly up and down her back, tasting joyful tears mixed with the coppery taste of her torn lip. She couldn't stop herself from weeping, feeling overwhelmed, the well-traveled pathways of her usual neural networks completely dark, new ones opening up like lightening flashes, jolting her alive.

He wiped at her tears, kissing her wet face. "This is where we started, I think." He chuckled.

His soft kisses grew passionate, his gentle hands pressing her body more firmly against him, and she could feel him, still fully aroused inside of her. She sat up, wiping at her tears, and his hands roamed the front of her, pushing the golden curtains of her hair aside to reveal her breasts to him. He groaned when she slid him out of her, the wet heat of him enormous in her hand, and groaned again as she made her way down his body.

"Your mouth," he murmured, concern in his voice. He reached his fingers out to brush over bruises, but she waved him away, wanting this, even if it made her sore.

She kissed the tip of him, her tongue sliding over the head, tasting her own sticky wetness. She looked up, her eyes looking for his as her mouth slid along his length. His hands went to her hair in response, guiding her, pressing

himself into her deeply, seeming to ask her to take him fully, and she did, wanting more. She gagged a little and she felt him ease up, but she pressed down again, feeling the responding thrust of him into her mouth, short little strokes that rubbed the tip against the back of her throat.

She moaned around his cock, sliding her hand down to touch herself and using her other hand to pull his skin taut, grazing up the underside of his shaft and then tickling her tongue around the ridges and edges. Ginny delighted in the hardness and softness all at once.

She explored him, feathering little kisses at the tip, tasting his pre-cum and rubbing it over her lips, moving them back down the underside, leaving a sweet, sticky trail. She enjoyed the feel, and sight of him, looking up the length of his cock and seeing it glistening and beginning to spill over as she licked his balls.

Her mouth found him again, unable to resist the throb and swell of him, slick with her juices and saliva and his own pre-cum now. He was grunting a little with every thrust into her throat, and she moaned with lust, the feel of him moving in her mouth making her hungry, even eager.

They did this dance for a long time, how long she didn't know, time seemed to disappear altogether. It was long enough that her mouth was aching and sore and her fingers, buried between her swollen pussy lips, were pruned from the wetness. He stopped her occasionally, breathing hard and urging her down to stillness until his pubic hair tickled her nose before releasing her to suck him anew.

"Ahh, Ginny, God... I need you," he said, his voice rough and harsh.

She eased her mouth off him, blowing on the shaft and then the tip, from warmth to coolness, teasing him. He growled as he moved to pull her up. Nick rolled her underneath him and searching her wetness for entry. It was found first with his fingers, then with his cock.

She gripped him, pitched into bliss, riding his fierce, driving momentum, and she found herself skidding toward some steep chasm that made her heady with anticipation. It felt like falling into nothing and everything all at once.

“I can’t...” he gasped against her ear, but her head was buzzing and his words were drowned, lost in the divine, slippery wet friction at the exquisite place their bodies were joined.

Her body heard his urgency, foresaw his imminent release, and responded to him as if the force of his cock into her flesh was a demand. She wrapped herself around him, digging her heels into the small of his back. She clung, tumbling with him into some abyss, as she felt him buck and shudder against her. Instead of plunging to what she felt might be her death, she did something unexpected. She soared, finding herself flowing, rising and rolling, lifted and awash with the whirling, drifting glide of flight, and she rode it out as if she had wings.

“Am I still dreaming?” she asked him as their breathing slowed. Their bodies were slick and slippery with a wetness that cooled them in the transition from passion to sleep.

He rolled to his side, his eyes lingering on her before conceding to her tug and letting her pull the covers up to her chin. "Do you want to be dreaming?" His eyes were soft, touching her bruised and battered lip and cheek with his finger.

She winced, remembering, grateful that for a few blissful moments she had forgotten. "Maybe." She pulled the covers over with her as she rolled away from him. He sighed as he slid behind her, his arm heavy across her ribs, but she didn't care. "I guess I'll know if I wake up here tomorrow, won't I?"

"Maybe." He fitted her hips against his.

She heard his breathing grow deep and even, cool against her cheek where her tears fell and then pooled at the hollow of her throat. She didn't even know why she was crying, but the tears kept coming even after she slipped toward sleep.

Chapter Five

“Merry Christmas.”

She felt a delicious shiver run through her at the sound of Nick’s voice, his breath in her ear. She opened her eyes in a slant of morning light, squinting, stretching and yawning. She turned and saw he was lying next to her, fully dressed. At least he wasn’t in uniform.

“Right...we’re supposed to go down to the police station today, huh?” she asked, sitting up. The covers fell to her waist before she realized she was no longer wearing any clothes. She quickly pulled them back up.

“Yeah.” He was admiring the curve of her hip, she noticed. “But let’s get some breakfast first. I washed your clothes and they’re folded in the basket in the hall. There’s a towel in the bathroom for you.”

“What time is it?”

“About ten,” he said. “Eggs, pancakes, bacon, sausage?”

“Yes,” she replied without hesitation, and he laughed. “It’s really ten?” She found the shirt she was wearing the night before and pulled it over her head.

“Do you have somewhere to go?”

She stood, heading toward the door. “Actually, yes.”

She took a quick shower, wondering how she was going to get out of here and over to Maggie’s without him. She got dressed, just one layer of clothes for the first time in a long time. By the time she finished packing everything into her backpack, she was drawn to the smell of bacon cooking.

On the way to the stairs, as she passed his bedroom, she glanced in to see if he was there. The view she saw stunned her, and she found herself drawn to his window. She stood there until she could see her breath appearing on the glass.

It was still snowing heavily outside, a good foot of snow covering the ground, a truly magical site, but that wasn't what astonished her now. From this vantage point, she could see into the video store lobby. She was staring at the corner she had slept in for weeks.

She made her way downstairs and found him in the living room in front of the lit fireplace, drinking coffee and brooding at the Christmas tree. "Pretty," she remarked, really looking at it for the first time. It was a real tree. She could smell the fresh pine scent as she passed and sat down opposite him on the couch.

"Yes," he replied, looking at her and not at the tree. "Do you want to see what Santa left you?" He smiled over the rim of his cup.

She laughed, and it was a bitter sound. "Santa hasn't left me gifts since I was six. But I really would love breakfast." Her rarely appeased stomach was growling quietly.

"Go look in your stocking," he said, still smiling.

She tilted her head at him and then looked at the mantle. Yesterday, there was only one stocking there. Today, there were two.

"The red one," he prompted.

Her heart was beating fast, but she retrieved it and sat back down on the couch. It felt empty. Wouldn't that just be too funny?

“So I guess you’ve been busy this morning,” she mumbled. “I didn’t get you anything, you know. Didn’t exactly know you were going to play knight errant to my damsel in distress.”

“Fat man. Red suit. Ho-ho-ho.” He grinned. “No worries. Just go ahead and look.”

“Nick...” she started, frowning.

“Just look,” he gently urged.

She put her hand in the stocking and pulled out an envelope. That was all. She opened it, tears filling her eyes. “How?” she wondered out loud, incredulous.

It was her bus ticket, and her twenty-dollar bill seemed to have multiplied overnight into quintuplets.

“Told ya. Santa left it.” He winked, but at the same time, he looked pained. He put down his coffee cup on the table. “I do have something for you, though. Under the tree.”

“For me? Nick, I don’t...” she began, but he stopped her by sliding across the couch and capturing her lips with his. Her bruised mouth was sore today and she winced but managed to kiss him back.

“I’ve been waiting to do that for hours,” he whispered into her hair. “Your little mouth finally relaxes when you’re sleeping, did you know that? You look like an angel. Now, will you please let me have this one morning before you run off to California?”

She didn’t respond, she couldn’t. Instead, she nodded, her arms going around him.

He encouraged her to retrieve her gifts from under the tree. She was like a fastidious child on Christmas morning, easing open the wrapped edges, folding the bright paper into careful squares. She relished every moment. He had bought her a drawing set, a book, pencils, several drawing pads, erasers, sharpeners, even a triangle and a blending stump. It was perfect.

She leapt into his lap, straddling his long, thick thigh, and hugging him tight, feathering kisses over his cheek. “When did you get this? How did you know?”

He shrugged. “Cops are always good at deduction. Do you want breakfast?”

She didn’t know if she could take any more kindness. There was a thick lump in her throat that she was trying to swallow. She followed him to the kitchen, finding exactly what he had offered on her plate—bacon, sausage, eggs, and pancakes.

“So what did you mean, about deduction?” she asked after he had retrieved ketchup for her eggs. Less than a day of eating real food in a real kitchen and she was rediscovering a thing called preference.

“Well, I knew you were homeless, probably a runaway,” he explained logically, pouring syrup. “I knew you needed help. I also knew if I approached you, you’d just run again, and I didn’t see how that was helping you.”

She listened, chewing thoughtfully.

“When I saw you rummaging through the garbage for food...God, Ginny, I couldn’t stand it. So I started leaving you things.”

She nodded. "The Scrunchie?"

"Your hair is in your face all the time." He smiled, looking sheepish.

She smiled, too, not sure if she was flattered or disturbed.

"Were you just going to leave the drawing kit in your garbage?" she asked, smirking. He shrugged, eating his eggs quickly. "Seriously, it's kind of creepy."

"I didn't know how to get near you. I tried, that day in Borders. But you were so afraid you practically jumped out of your skin every time you saw me."

She snorted, rolling her eyes. "You'd jump, too, if you knew Patrick."

"I wish I did," he said darkly.

They ate in silence for a while and Ginny sipped her orange juice like it was liquid sunshine.

"What I don't understand..." he said, his voice changing a little bit as he mopped at his eggs with a piece of toast, "is what you did with the money?"

Her heart lurched in her chest and she covered it with her hand, sure it was going to leap out. Her face burned.

"What?" she whispered, although he had been clear, unmistakably clear. The look on his face was pained, torn.

"I saw it all happen. I called it in myself, although...I don't know why I didn't tell them about you. I should have."

The silence roared between them. Ginny thought she had forgotten how to breathe for a moment. When she dared to look at him, she saw his torment in the working of his jaw and the sadness in his eyes.

“When you didn’t come back, I thought you must have used the money to skip town. I was as surprised as I’ve ever been when I saw you there last night. I sat here, knowing I could make one phone call and do the ‘right’ thing...” He sighed, rubbing his fingers over his eyes. “I don’t know what the right thing is anymore.”

She didn’t know what to say. Despite the delicious meal she had just eaten, she had an awful taste in her mouth.

“I didn’t want it,” she confessed. “I didn’t know what to do with it. If I returned it, I was afraid I’d get caught. If I kept it, I was a thief.”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“Do you really want to know where it went?” she asked him, her heart aching wide open.

“I don’t know... Do I?”

She reached across the table and squeezed his hand. “Will you take me somewhere?”

“As long as it isn’t a bus station,” he said, his heart in his eyes.

She shook her head and smiled.

* * * *

“Oh my God, what happened to your face? Who is this?” Maggie stood at the door in her nightgown, although it was almost noon, the boys chasing each other around inside the apartment behind her.

“Merry Christmas to you, too.” Ginny smiled. “Can we come in?”

Maggie frowned, then hugged her, pulling her into the apartment, away from Nick. He stood in the hallway, hesitating, waiting.

“Come on.” Ginny reached her hand out for him.

Maggie did her wide-eyed “What is this?” look behind Nick’s back.

Ginny called to the boys. “Hey, guys, I’d like you to meet my friend, Nick.”

A chorus of two screaming, “Aunt Ginny!” surrounded them in an instant. Ginny swept them both up, groaning under the weight.

“You guys need to stop getting so big. Sean, Michael, this is Nick.” She made brief introductions, because they were already asking their mother if they could now open their presents from Aunt Ginny.

“Let them.” Ginny smiled, pulling Nick over to the couch to sit.

The boys opened their respective packages with the same attitude they did everything, Sean tearing in without a second thought, Michael carefully lifting each taped edge.

“X-Men!” Sean exclaimed, flipping through the pages.

Maggie stared over his shoulder. “Oh my God, Ginny. Did you draw these?”

Ginny nodded, watching Michael’s face as he goggled at Sean’s book, and noticed he was edging his package open much faster now.

“You did?” Nick looked stunned. “Hey, buddy, can I see that?” he asked Sean, who reluctantly handed it over.

“I got Spiderman!” Michael exclaimed, delighted.

Nick glanced over at Michael's booklet of drawings, too, shaking his head in wonder. "Wow, these are really good," he told her, leafing through them.

Maggie was nodding, looking proud. "Isn't she amazing? I keep telling her she needs to go to art school. She should have used the money she gave me as the deposit on this place for school, but nooo..."

Maggie looked fondly at her anyway, and Ginny smiled back at her sister. Sean snatched his book back from Nick, going to compare his with his brother's.

Nick turned to Ginny, his eyes softening. "When did you move?" he asked Maggie, not taking his eyes off Ginny's.

"It was such a gift, about a week ago, just in time for Christmas," Maggie told him, gathering up the wrapping paper on the floor. "We didn't have anything, we were living in a women's shelter..."

Nick nodded, his eyes moving over Ginny's face.

"We still don't have very much, just what was donated to us. At least the boys are getting a real Christmas, in a real home..." Her voice trailed off as she looked affectionately at her sons huddled together on the floor.

Ginny flushed when Nick lifted her chin and kissed her fully on the mouth. Both boys noticed and whooped. Maggie stood there with wrapping paper in her hands, stunned.

"Did I do the right thing?" Her voice trembled.

"You are the right thing," he whispered in her ear, and she felt something loosen in her chest, spreading like warm liquid through her middle.

They spent several hours with Maggie and the boys, Nick making numerous piggyback runs to and from their beds to the couch and back while Maggie listened across the kitchen table with growing horror to her sister's quiet tale. She hugged both Nick and Ginny tearfully as they left.

The only thing she didn't reveal, Ginny realized as they drove back toward Nick's house, was that she had a ticket in her pocket for a bus that was leaving in about two hours.

"I thought I'd make you dinner," he said, pulling into the driveway. "For the road."

They sat in the car for a moment, listening to the ticking of the engine.

"Sure," she agreed.

He decided on hamburgers, something quick and simple. "Not much of a Christmas dinner."

She shrugged. "I'm glad to have any dinner at all."

They ate in silence, and she helped him clear the table and load the dishwasher before excusing herself to use the bathroom. He finished up in the kitchen while she wandered around his living room, touching surfaces as she went as if she could absorb him somehow through them.

"Your bus leaves in an hour," he said, coming in and starting a fire. "Do you want me to take you to the station?"

She sat on the floor in front of the tree, looking into the fireplace, but she didn't answer. He settled himself behind her, pulling her close, and she snuggled back between his legs. He kissed her neck, tugging at her shirt to expose her

shoulder. They were small, sparing kisses, almost as if reluctant to begin anything they couldn't finish.

"Nick?"

"Hm?"

"Why haven't you asked me about the tape?"

He sighed, kissing the top of her head. "I thought right and wrong was black and white before I met you. Now...I don't know."

"What do you mean?" She leaned back into him.

"It's not my decision to make," he finally replied. "And I trust you to do what's right for you."

She felt a lump growing in her throat. "Thank you."

"Ginny...you're an amazing artist...and an amazing woman. And...I don't want you to go..." He sounded resigned, like he was conceding something. He rested his chin on the top of her head.

She changed the subject. "Hey, did you check to see what Santa brought you?"

He leaned in to look at her, smiling, quizzical. "What did you do?" he asked, unable to keep the anticipation out of his voice. "Draw me something?"

She smiled, tucking her hair behind her ear. "Well, go look."

He stood up to go get the stocking hanging on the fireplace.

"It's the green one," she joked.

He smirked, coming to sit by her again, reaching into the stocking. His face changed when he pulled the tiny cassette out. It looked so small in his hand,

and Ginny wondered at it again, how impossible it seemed that it could contain something so big.

“Are you sure?” His eyes met hers.

“Yes,” she replied, and she was. “But there’s more in there...keep looking.”

Shaking his head, he reached his hand back into the stocking. “Paper. Hm, I wonder what it could be...” He teased, winking at her.

She stuck her tongue out at him. “Go ahead and look.”

He pulled out an envelope and stared at it for a moment.

“No?” she asked, disappointed.

He looked up at her, at the tears in her eyes, at the fear of rejection and abandonment there and then back down at the bus ticket in his hand. “Yes,” he breathed, holding his arms out for her and gathering her in. “If it’s what you really want, then yes, Ginny. Yes.”

She searched his eyes for the truth and found it, searched her heart for her own, and found that as well. She knew there was nothing she wanted more than to be here in this man’s arms, feeling safe, protected, and for the first time in her life, truly loved.

“It is what I want,” she whispered. “More than anything.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, sounding uncertain.

She turned, plucking the bus ticket from his hand and after saying a quick and unequivocal goodbye to white sand and sunshine, she tossed it into the fire to watch it wither and curl, turning to ash.

“Well! I guess so.” He chuckled. “But Ginny, hon...I think that ticket was refundable.”

She looked shocked for a moment, then laughed. “So much for the dramatic!”

“I think we’ve had enough drama, don’t you?” He smiled, teasing her.

“Nope,” she assured him, snuggling against him in the light of the fire. “I bet we’ve got a lifetime of drama left to live.”

“I hope so,” he whispered against the softness of her mouth.

They found each other again and again that night while the snow fell heavily and the wind wailed outside and Ginny finally discovered what home really felt like in his arms.

The End

ABOUT SELENA KITT



Like any feline, Selena Kitt loves the things that make her purr—and wants nothing more than to make others purr right along with her! Pleasure is her middle name, whether it's a short cat nap stretched out in the sun or a long kitty bath. She makes it a priority to explore all the delightful distractions she can find, and follow her vivid and often racy imagination wherever it wants to lead her.

Her writing embodies everything from the spicy to the scandalous, but watch out—this kitty also has sharp claws and her stories often include intriguing edges and twists that take readers to new, thought-provoking depths.

When she's not pawing away at her keyboard, Selena runs an innovative publishing company (www.excessica.com) and in her spare time, she worships her devoted husband, corrals four kids and a dozen chickens, all while growing an organic garden. She also loves bellydancing and photography.

Her story, *Connections*, was one of the runners-up for the [2006 Rauxa Prize](#), given annually to an erotic short story of “exceptional literary quality,” out of over 1,000 nominees, where awards are judged by a select jury and all entries are read “blind” (without author's name available.) She has also been an EPIC Award Finalist two years in a row (2008 and 2009) with [EcoErotica](#) and [The Real Mother Goose](#).

She can be reached on her website at www.selenakitt.com.

If you liked [CHRISTMAS STALKING](#), try:



PAPERBACK ROMANCE

Maya's heart yearns for romance and adventure, so that's what she writes about--but James Reardon, her college creative writing professor, insists she's wasting both time and talent. Determined to prove him wrong, Maya stumbles onto the fact that her professor's been keeping secrets--not the least of which is his attraction to her. Faced with a choice, she will have to decide whether or not to reveal his secret to the world--and her own desire for a man nearly twice her age.

Warnings: This title contains graphic language and really hot sex.

EXCERPT from PAPERBACK ROMANCE:

She heard him come in, and she found herself hesitating to go back out, staring at herself in the mirror. Her eyes were bright, her cheeks flushed, and her whole body tingling, like a limb that had gone to sleep and was just waking up.

What was happening seemed so out of character for both of them—it seemed too fantastic to be real. Was she really sitting in her Ancient History class right now,

looking out the window, chewing on a pen cap, and dreaming all of this? Part of her thought that must be the case. When she opened the door, he was standing by the open window, looking out at the lake. He smiled at her and held out a hand. She took it, still marveling at his touch, and joined him. The sun was brilliant on the water as it rippled toward shore.

“Look.” He pointed toward the mallards that were paddling toward the reeds. As she watched, she saw a mother duck leading her little downy ducklings all in a row for a swim out on the lake.

She watched them in wonder, all too aware of James’ body, his hip against her hip, his hand moving around her waist. “I wonder which one is going to grow up to be a swan?”

He smiled down at her, his attention shifting, his eyes falling to her mouth. “This one.” He tilted her chin up and kissed her. This wasn’t like the tentative kiss in the car. This one was full of passion and an eager longing that matched her own. She whimpered against his lips, seeking his center with her tongue.

He breathed her in—she could feel the expanding of his chest as he pulled her in tight, his hands seeking the bare skin of her back under her t-shirt. The bed seemed miles away as they kissed and touched their way towards it, peeling off clothes and exploring each other as they went. His mouth seemed to want to devour her and she met him like a lifetime of pent-up breath until they were gasping, collapsed, his body pressing her to the floor still five feet short of the bed.

Her t-shirt was pulled up, his jacket off, shirt unbuttoned, and they were pressed belly to belly, but it made the thickness of her jeans too much—she couldn’t feel the

heat of him like she wanted. Her fingers fumbled with the snap and zipper, wiggling out, and the writhing of her under him as she exposed her panties and bare thighs brought a growl from his throat that sent a shiver through her.

She toed her jeans the rest of the way off, wrapping her legs around him when they were free, digging her heels into his lower back and arching. He fumbled with the front hook of her bra and she brushed his hands away, impatient, rolling on top of him and sitting. His eyes were full of lust as he looked up at her peeling off her t-shirt, unhooking her bra and letting her breasts spill out into his hands as she leaned forward to kiss him, her mouth hungry.

She rocked her hips, her thin panties rubbing against the material of his trousers, the bite of his belt a shock as he grabbed her sides and slid her up so he could lick and suck at her nipples like a man who had never tasted flesh before. The eagerness of his mouth made her hips rock hard and she wanted more still. She slid up his belly and sat on his chest, pulling her panties aside to show him the red fuzz between her legs. The groan that elicited was so gratifying that she gave him a little more pink, spreading her lips open so she could rub her clit...

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