

Guarding Christmas

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**Wherever you are and however you celebrate the
joys of living and loving, I hope you enjoy Yvie
and Gray's Christmas.**

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1. Chapter 1

“Well, shoot.” Hands on hips, head tilted back, Yvie frowned at the kitten atop the Christmas tree. The little ball of ginger and white fluff had knocked the angel askew and clung in its place, mewing defiance and fear.

Beside Yvie, a woman in her early thirties scolded her young daughter for opening the kitten’s box. They’d just bought the kitten in the pet shop at the entrance to the mall. Now the daughter was on the verge of tears, about to add her cries to those of the kitten’s.

Already, a crowd was gathering.

“Here’s what we’ll do,” Yvie said, trying to live up to the uniform she wore. She was a security guard, temporarily. It was up to her to solve problems and keep people safe—including kittens. “Someone get me a chair.” She was tall and the tree wasn’t that much higher than her. If she stood on tiptoes on the chair. . .

Large, gentle hands clamped her shoulders and moved her fractionally aside.

She froze. Only one man had a touch like that—or rather, only one man had a touch that set her whole body on full alert. She inhaled cautiously. Over the artificial pine scent sprayed on the Christmas tree, she smelled the warm, male scent that was uniquely Gray Weldon’s.

He stood half behind, half beside her as he stretched up. His hand was

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tanned, faintly scarred, the sleeve of his coat dragging back, showing the navy blue sweater beneath. He crowded her space, seeking another couple of inches to reach the kitten safely. She tried to shuffle away, but his arm wrapped around her waist, keeping her there, against him.

“Come here, little guy. No, don’t scamper away.” His breath brushed her ear.

She doubted the kitten heard the low words over the noise of the mall, but she did. The coaxing tone sent a shiver over her skin.

“There we go.” Gray brought the kitten down safely and cradled it a moment.

Her eyes followed the kitten and she turned unthinkingly in the circle of Gray’s arm. She looked up at his face and found him watching her, not the kitten.

“Hello, Yvie.”

“Thank you so much. Sophia, thank the nice man.”

Yvie breathed a prayer of thanks for the interruption of the kitten’s owner.

“Thank you, mister.”

“You’re welcome.” Gray had to release Yvie to complete the complicated transfer of kitten into the box. He crouched easily, powerful muscles under complete control.

She was accustomed to athletic men, so why did his every movement captivate her? Four years ago, he’d taught her that the captivation wasn’t mutual. She’d moved on.

Speaking of which... she smiled a professional “move along” message to the crowd. The slight drama over, people recalled their purpose for being at the mall. With three days to Christmas, they couldn’t waste shopping time.

The kitten had been restored to its box and Gray was rising from his crouch.

Yvie turned away and started for the security office. Yes, Gray was an old friend of her brother Paul, of all her brothers, but she and he weren’t friends. Not any more.

He fell in step with her in five strides.

“Thanks for rescuing the kitten.”

“No problem.”

“Your good deed for the day. You’ll have great shopping karma for that.”

Silence. Well, what did she expect? Gray had never done social chatter.

But he’d talked to her, long discussions about everything and nothing, the state of the world, the best flavor of ice cream, her history studies.

He’d seduced her with his interest and she hadn’t realized he’d just been filling in time. He’d been between ops, restless the way Paul got when he wasn’t actively working.

“Can I buy you a coffee?”

Her nerves jerked, but her body kept moving smoothly. She was proud that there wasn’t a hitch in her walk. “Thanks, but I’m a bit busy.” She indicated her uniform.

The security firm was her dad’s. He’d started it ten years ago, retiring from the elite police squad he’d captained and going for a lower stress option. Lower stress, ha. He’d built the business into a multimillion dollar enterprise. But at least there was no threat of him being shot.

“Your shift is over,” Gray said.

She did stop then, and frowned at him. It was typical of him to know that sort of detail. Reconnaissance. Except she wasn’t an enemy target.

“Unless you have plans?” He raised an eyebrow.

“Coffee’ll keep me awake.” It was late afternoon. It was a fair excuse.

“Hot chocolate. With marshmallows.”

The smile in his blue eyes was unfair. She found herself smiling back and agreeing.

“Good.” He followed her back to the office and waited for her to shed the bulky security belt.

Of course he knew the operations manager Thaddeus, one of her dad’s buddies. Her dad and mom kept an open house and with a large family, they were always entertaining. They knew everyone, and by extension, so did she. Add in four protective older brothers and it was no wonder she’d never rebelled as a kid. It would be too embarrassing to be caught and returned home by a family friend.

“I saw the kitten rescue,” Thaddeus said. “Teach you that in the army?”

“Advanced training, special ops,” Gray said.

Except it was no joke. He was in special ops, as was Paul.

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Yvie stowed away the belt and collected her coat and bag. The bright patchwork satchel mightn't match her uniform, but she felt naked without it. It held her camera, purse, cell and a dozen other vital items. She thought of reaching for the lipstick, but that might mistakenly suggest she cared what Gray thought of her.

#

The waitress brought two hot chocolates, with marshmallows for her and cream for Gray. Yvie picked up a spoon and poked at the pink and white blobs. Dunking them was a good excuse to avoid staring at him.

He hadn't changed. Same dark brown hair, angular face and blue eyes.

Paul Newman eyes, her grandma had said once, and cast a shrewd glance at Yvie.

He wasn't handsome, but he was compelling. She sighed and put down the spoon. Time to be an adult, get this conversation over and done.

"I heard you got your doctorate," he said. "Congratulations."

"Thanks." Twenty five was young to have a PhD. She'd worked for it, though, channeling the same intensity that her brothers gave to their security work. "Did you also hear that I quit the university?"

"Paul said something about it."

She sipped her hot chocolate. She could guess what else Paul had said. No one in the family approved of her decision to quit the university, to step off the academic treadmill. They didn't approve and they didn't understand. They all thought she'd wise up and go back. That's why her dad had given her this temporary job as a security guard.

Extra guards were always needed at Christmas—for the crowds and because desperate people were tempted to steal.

She knew that as the boss's daughter she'd been given an easy post, up near the children's shops, away from where the teenagers hung out and where the bulk of thefts occurred. Not that anyone actually envied her the post. Nope. The other guards were all men and they were glad to steer clear of crying kids, straying kids, distraught parents and confused grandparents.

She took another sip of hot chocolate, snaring a melting marshmallow. She deserved it.

"He said you wanted to make your photography a full time job."

Between them on the table lay a small Christmas arrangement. It was green and red and frosted with white. Yvie suspected it was meant to be mistletoe around a candle, but the candle was as fake as Gray's interest.

Or maybe his interest was genuine?

She curled her hands around the warmth of her cup. He probably was interested. All that time he'd spent talking to her, years ago. He undoubtedly saw her as a baby sister. It seemed all the guys did—all the guys her brothers brought home. She knew other men found her interesting as a woman. Guys who were smart and funny, who she'd met at college and university. Unfortunately, they lacked the dynamism of the men she'd grown up with—men who served their country and community, who fought and protected and took charge without thinking.

"Photography is my full time job," she said firmly.

His gaze flickered to her security guard uniform.

She shrugged one shoulder. "A bit of extra money never hurt anyone."

She knew how lucky she was to be starting life without student loans. Her parents had paid for college and university. But she was on her own now, and although she'd budgeted carefully and knew she could afford her dream, innate caution had led her to take on the security job. Its temporary nature suited her plans. After Christmas, when the family had enjoyed the festivities, then she would tell them what she really intended. No point starting a fight before Christmas.

Her family weren't overly protective. They just had one standard for "the boys" who could risk their lives in Afghanistan or any other hellhole, and one for her. She had to stay safe.

It was her own fault, and she accepted the blame. Until four years ago she'd let herself be protected from life. Gray had shown her the dangers of that fantasy world. In a way, her family should blame him for what she intended to do. In the shock of his rejection, she'd grown up. Each step she'd taken since then, had been a step toward independence.

"You've always loved history," he said.

She recalled that other winter, four years past. Sam, her oldest brother, had been getting married. Family and friends were coming in from all over. They'd gone out to dinner, but she'd cried off, tired from all the work being a bridesmaid entailed. She'd curled up in front of the fireplace at her

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parents' house and when Gray had knocked at the door, she'd let him in. They'd roasted chestnuts, Gray cutting the cross in them first with a knife drawn from an ankle sheath.

She grinned now, unwillingly amused. How many other women would have so casually accepted his skill with a knife or the fact he carried one?

In front of the fire, they'd talked about women's history, how women from the past had written their stories not with words, but in how they furnished their houses, sewed their clothes, laid out their gardens. No, be truthful. She'd talked and he'd listened. She'd been bubbling over with the pleasure of finally solving the puzzle that was her mom.

Her mom had never had a job outside the home in all of Yvie's life, but no one ever underestimated her mom's intelligence, organizational ability or raw courage. She'd married a cop and accepted all four boys going into the services. She was the strong center of the family. That was what the house showed: her mom's strength and how she coped with life.

Yvie had gone on to write her doctoral thesis on domestic courage, on women during the Great Depression and the Second World War and how their belongings revealed their survival strategies.

She shook off her memories, realizing by the lukewarm nature of her hot chocolate how long she'd been silent. "Sorry. Never mind my plans. How long are you back for? Will you be spending Christmas State-side?"

"I'm back for good, Yvie. I'm out of the army and working for myself."

"You left the service?" Her mind stuttered. She didn't believe it. It was part of who the man was: honor, duty, self-discipline.

"You must know from Paul that the last op went wrong?"

She nodded. Jim Farleigh, one of the team, had died. He'd been buried down in Florida, near his family. Two others were wounded. Gray, Paul had said, got them out.

"I decided it was enough." His mouth firmed into the stern line characteristic of him. He met her eyes directly. "I want a future."

2. Chapter 2

Gray looked at the woman sitting across the table from him, her lips faintly rimmed in hot chocolate and her eyes wide with surprise, and knew himself for a coward. If he'd truly been of the no guts, no glory crowd, he'd have finish his sentence. "I want a future, Yvie—with you." But she seemed shocked enough at his decision to leave the army, and he'd have had to be stupid to miss her earlier wariness. She hadn't wanted to sit down with him, to talk and remember old times.

He'd been a fool twice over at Sam's wedding. And that didn't count his willful blindness in the days, no months, preceding it. He'd gotten into the habit of dropping into the Harrisons' house. His visits had seemed innocuous. He was friends with all the brothers and lots of guys wandered in and out of the house. The other guys, though, hadn't spent hours chatting with Yvie. They hadn't learned how her brown eyes lit with laughter or her wide mouth curled in a secret smile when she made a sly joke. She was smart and funny and...

He'd told himself she was his friends' sister, their baby sister. He was *just* being friendly. He'd never known the warmth of an extended family. He enjoyed the novelty.

Meantime he reveled in the way Yvie's eyes sought his in a crowd. How she smiled, for him.

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He lied to himself up until the day of Sam's wedding. Then he'd seen Yvie in her bridesmaid's gown, the golden color of a sunset. Curves normally hidden by her casual student's uniform of comfy sweater and old jeans, were now on display for the world to see. Her hair, no longer confined to a braid, whisped around her face and hung down her back to her waist. At least it covered some of her bare back.

His fingers tightened on the edge of the table. Four years later and he could remember the feel of her skin as they danced. She'd been sexy and pliable and—as the night vanished into shadows and slow music—he'd lost his head and danced her out of the room into a quiet alcove.

"I can't believe you've quit the army. Wow. That's even more unlikely than me leaving the university. I thought it was your life."

Her comment brought him back to the here and now. "So did I." The army had given him his first sense of belonging. It had found a way to use his hacking skills and the special forces training he'd pitted his body against. The army had given his life structure.

But he wanted more. He wanted emotion and passion and Yvie.

She looked at him over the ridiculous plastic Christmas arrangement on the table. "Are you okay?"

And that was typical Yvie, cutting to the heart of the matter. Caring. That last op had been a nightmare.

"Yeah. I'd been thinking of leaving for a while." Thinking and planning. "I've set up as a consultant. I'll be using my mad hacking skills to defend businesses rather than countries."

"Saving the world, one mouse-click at a time." Her mouth curved at the old shared joke.

"Something like that." He realized he was fidgeting with his empty hot chocolate mug and pushed it aside. "Yvie—"

"I'd better get going, let you carry on with your shopping." She made a production of gathering up her bag, scarf and coat.

"I'll drive you home."

She froze, then finished tugging on her coat. "I'm fine."

"Thaddeus said you caught the bus here."

"That man! What is it with retired cops? Do they grow an extra set of eyes, on extendable stalks?"

He stood up, curious that she'd avoided answering him. "What's wrong with your car?" His instinct for evasion flared into outright suspicion at Yvie's swift, guilty look. "Did you have an accident?"

"No." A huff of exasperation. "I sold my car. Someone offered me a good price, and since I've been thinking of changing it anyway... I'll get Dad or one of the boys to help me buy something new after Christmas."

"You should have kept the one you had. You could have worked out a trade-in deal."

"Well, I didn't—and catching the bus is fine. Thanks for the hot chocolate. I'll see you around."

His jaw tightened. He probably was out of line, telling Yvie what she should have done, but he still didn't appreciate the brush off.

The false cheeriness of the mall's Christmas music grated on his ears and he hated the enclosed feeling of too many people. With a couple of steps, Yvie had put a granny with a shopping trolley between them. He skirted the obstacle and closed the distance between them.

"I'm driving you home."

"You're persistent."

She had no idea.

"But I promise not to tell the boys you let me catch a bus by myself." She mocked his concern.

"This isn't about your brothers. It's about you and me." A kid running past bumped Yvie. Gray steadied her automatically, then kept his hand on elbow. "Besides, my car has a heater."

"You tempter. Okay, a lift would be great." But she pulled her arm away.

#

I should have caught the bus. There was an intimacy about being shut away with a man in a car, and the cab of Gray's new pick-up was smaller than the average car. She was aware of the flex of his thigh muscles as he changed gear, of his hand on the stick, so close to her knee.

She would have caught the bus except she'd heard the determination in his voice. Whatever the reason, he hadn't been willing to let it go.

"So, do you have plans for Christmas?" It was a safe question. Impersonal.

"Your mom invited me to Christmas dinner."

Her eyes widened, but she kept them fixed on the road. Car brake lights flashed and reflected on the snow. Her hands fisted, but Gray wouldn't know, she assured herself. Her hands were hidden in her pockets. "Then this isn't a flying visit?"

"Nope. I've bought a house." He braked smoothly for a red light and looked at her. "It's near the university. Used to be a group house, so it needs some TLC, but I got it for a good price."

"You're settling down, here? But I thought... your parents..."

"Mom's in Shanghai with Doug and the kids. His corporation posted him there. Dad's in Alaska. I like Vermont."

"Oh." Full stop.

"You'll have to see the house. Give me your opinion on it. It's one of the bungalows from the 1920s."

She loved the Jazz Age. The architecture had a wonderful blend of elegance and exuberance. The houses were gracious and welcoming. She'd always dreamed of living in one.

"There's a full yard, completely overgrown. I'll have to cut back the bushes, then reseed the lawn in spring. What? Why are you staring?"

"I'm picturing you as a homeowner."

The traffic started moving again.

"And how do I look?" he challenged softly.

"Happy. Determined. Like a man who knows what he wants." She put out a hand, pointed. "You need to turn right, just up ahead." And when he did so. "Take the next left and then the second apartment block on your right."

He followed her directions—well, the spoken ones. He completely frustrated her unspoken hopes by parking and switching off the engine. Still, she tried. One hand on the door handle, she said. "Thanks for the lift. I guess I'll see you at Christmas."

"I'll walk you in."

"There's no need." She gave up as he stepped out of the warm cab and closed the door, quiet but firm. "You shouldn't waste your shopping time, not this close to Christmas. Hey!" A courier exiting the foyer caught her attention. He was carrying an awfully big box and she'd been waiting on a late delivery. "Is that for me?"

The guy looked at her over the edge of the huge box. “If you’re Yvonne Harrison, it might be.”

“That’s me. I’ve got some ID somewhere.” She started to rummage through her bag.

“Forget about it. I’m late as it is. Just sign.” He pushed the box at Gray and unhooked the electronic signature gizmo from his belt.

Yvie signed.

The courier grunted something that might have been “thanks”.

“Happy Christmas,” she called after him.

A hand flipped in acknowledgement and dismissal.

She turned back to Gray and held out her arms. “I’ll take that.”

“Not likely. It’s huge. I’ll carry it in.”

“It’s not very heavy.”

But he wouldn’t release the box.

She sighed and led the way in, to catch the elevator to the third floor. Mentally she psyched herself up. It would be a bit rude, but she’d take the box from Gray at her door. No matter what he said, she wouldn’t let him in. Christmas was only three days away. After its festivities were safely behind them, then she could let her family know her plans.

The problem was, she really hated confrontations.

“Am I allowed to ask what’s in the box?”

She blinked. “Luke’s present.” Luke was the youngest of her brothers, the closest in age to herself. “When he was a kid, his worst insult was to call someone a dodo-head. You know, so dumb they went extinct?”

“I get it.”

The elevator arrived and they stepped in. The doors closed with their usual glacial speed.

“Luke used the insult so often, the boys started calling him Dodo. They quit about when he left high school, but when I saw a giant toy dodo bird online, I had to buy it.”

Gray stared down at the huge box he held. “It’s a unique gift.”

She grinned. “It’ll be interesting how he explains it to his current girlfriend.”

The doors rattled open. She squared her shoulders and set off down the hallway. At her door, she stopped.

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Gray stopped, too. He looked at her quizzically. “Keys?”

She held them up. “Just pop the box down. I’ll carry it in.”

He made no move to obey. “You got a dead body in there?” He jerked his head at her door.

“Funny.”

Abruptly, the humor fled from his eyes and the flat, hard “warrior” look claimed his face. “Are you scared to be alone with me?”

“No.” She reached out instinctively, touching his arm. That would be the worst of insults to a man dedicated to protecting the innocent.

“If a creep has hurt you. . . ”

“Nothing like that. Oh fudge.” She fumbled with her keys and finally got the door unlocked. So much for keeping Gray out. She should have known better than to try. She pushed the door wide and indicated for him to precede her. “Just don’t tell my parents.”

3. Chapter 3

“You’re moving.” Gray looked around Yvie’s small apartment. The cheerful yellow walls looked achingly bare without pictures hanging on them and the low book cases that lined them were similarly empty. Only the packing boxes littering the living area were full.

“Yes, I’m moving.” She dropped her keys on a packing box and set her bag down beside it. “Put the box down anywhere.” She shrugged off her coat and hung it over a hook.

Gray set the box down and took off his own coat. He hung it beside hers, a silent message that he wasn’t going anywhere.

He hadn’t expected this. Sure, he’d picked up her reluctance to have him drive her home and she’d definitely tried to prevent him entering the apartment, but he’d put it down to variously discomfort from his behavior four years ago, the teeth-gritting thought that she had a man waiting for her and finally, agonizingly, that a guy had attacked her and made her wary of being alone with a man.

That she was moving had simply never entered his head.

“Do your folks know?” He indicated the boxes.

“Not yet.” She eyed him with exasperation and a hint of humor. “You’re not leaving without an explanation, are you? Sit down.”

He waited till she'd sat, then settled on the sofa, beside her. It wasn't a big sofa and he was a big man. There were ten inches between them.

"Paul told you I'd left the university. Did he tell you I've won a couple of awards for my photography?"

"He might have bragged on it a bit."

She smiled, but it was a brief effort and her shoulders stayed tense. "A publisher got in touch with me, someone who knew my doctoral advisor. Apparently there's a market for high class coffee table books, the kind that combine photos with academic standard research and writing. We kicked around some ideas, based on my thesis, and came up with a focus on small town New England museums, the kind that occupy old houses, and how their exhibits reveal the lives of women in history."

"It sounds perfect for you." It did. And her family would be proud of her—and relieved she'd be using her academic qualifications. "So why keep it secret? Are you going to surprise your family at Christmas?"

"I hope not," she said fervently.

He hooked his knee up, angling around to study her.

"Part of my publishing contract included a small advance." She stared at her hands, then took a deep breath and looked directly at him. "I've given up the lease on this apartment, from New Year's Day. And I sold my car because I intend to buy a small motorhome. I'm going to travel around, investigating small museums, taking photos. There ought to be journal articles as well as a book or two in that."

"You're going to drive around by yourself? Camping alone?"

She nodded.

"No."

She jumped up and paced the length of the room, winding a path around the packing boxes. "And that's why I haven't told my family."

"Because they'd talk some sense into you?"

"Because this is my life and my decision, but I don't want to spoil Christmas for everyone by arguing with them."

He swore under his breath.

She scowled at him. "I'm not crazy. I'd choose popular camping grounds and I'd even carry a gun. I'd be safe. I *can* look after myself."

“There’s looking after yourself—and stupidly courting danger. Couldn’t you... I don’t know... maybe stay in hotels, bed and breakfasts? Hell, I’d drive you anywhere you wanted to go.”

“Gray, this is my adventure. A motorhome makes sense. I can keep all my gear in it, cook for myself, work in my own space.”

Her voice told him how important this was to her, but he couldn’t get beyond his own outrage. She had no right running off just when he came home—which was a totally irrational, selfish response, but so what? The bottom line was it simply wasn’t safe for Yvie to go gallivanting around the countryside. Anything could happen to her.

“I bought a house near the university.”

“So you said.” *So what?* her tone implied. To her it was a non sequitur.

“I bought the house for you.”

She sat down on a packing box. “Pardon?”

“I didn’t mean to say that.” He cursed his own lack of control. “I... oh hell.”

“Why would you buy a house for me?”

“Don’t be dumb. I bought it for you and me. For us.”

“Gray.” She looked freaked. “There is no ‘you and me’. No ‘us’.”

“There should be.” From this position, there was nowhere left for him to go but forward, via a detour to the past. “Four years ago I was an idiot.”

Yvie folded her arms, a self-protective gesture.

“At Sam’s wedding, you were gorgeous. Sexy where you’d always been... comfortable before.”

She pulled a face. “Comfortable.”

“Normal, ordinary... a friend. But in your bridesmaid’s dress, with your hair loose, dancing in the shadows. You seduced me, Yvie.”

“You’re the one who tugged me off the dance floor, into that alcove. *You kissed me.*”

“And you kissed me back,” he retorted. “You kissed me back, hot and sweet and eager.”

She blushed.

“You lit a forest fire, sweetheart, and you didn’t even know it.”

“I knew.”

He shook his head. “I could have taken you against the wall, with your family in the next room. When I realized how out of control I was—”

“You pushed me away. You stared at me like I was Medusa, yanked my dress back into place and hustled me back into the reception room. I had to go hide in the ladies room till I could face people again.”

“And I went out and drank myself into a stupor.”

“You did?”

“Oh yeah. I’d just found myself making out with my best friend’s baby sister.”

“I was twenty one years old, Gray. Hardly a baby.”

“I spent three years trying to pretend it hadn’t happened.”

“Why? What was so wrong with me?” It was a cry from the heart.

He grabbed her hand and pulled her down onto the sofa beside him. “Nothing was wrong with you.” She tried to wriggle away, but he kept an arm around her. “That was the problem. You weren’t just Paul’s sister, you’ve always been the sort of girl who deserves forever—or at the least, a serious commitment. Four years ago, I couldn’t give you that.”

“So *you* decided I was too good for a casual relationship?”

“Yes.”

“And I didn’t get a vote?”

There wasn’t a good answer to that question. Instead, he tightened his arm. “A year ago I realized I’d never forgotten you. Not just the kiss, but our conversations. I’ve missed them. I don’t like the cool politeness we’ve had between us. I guess I grew up. I realized I could be the guy you deserve. I just had to get my act together.”

“Buy a house, get a steady job, stop wandering into warzones.” Her tone mocked his intentions.

“All of that.”

“Well, you’re too late.”

“What?”

“You’re too late,” she repeated herself with obvious pleasure.

“If you think you’re in love with another guy, it won’t stop me.” The way he felt, he’d cheerfully rip the loser apart. He’d never dreamed this first meeting with Yvie could go so wrong.

“It’s me, Gray. I’ve changed. You’ve made yourself into Mr. Boring to match my Ms. Comfortable, but that’s not me anymore. I want adventure.”

“You can have your adventures with me.” Heroically he refrained from challenging her on that “Mr. Boring”.

“No, I don’t think I can.”

“Why not?”

“Because I wouldn’t want to prevent you from finding your Ms. Comfortable.”

“Honey, snarky doesn’t suit you.”

“Gray, you can’t march back into my life and say ‘this is how things are going to be’.”

He groaned. “I didn’t plan to. You rattled me with your packing boxes and your attitude. Believe it or not, I wanted to woo you. I intend to woo you.”

“No.”

“Yes.” He picked her up and dumped her in his lap. Before she could formulate a protest, he kissed her open mouth, sealing in the words.

Hunger roared through him. This was what he remembered. Yvie’s heat and taste and the sheer rightness of it. One hand dug into the softness of her hip, the other held her head immobile. He deepened the kiss, demanding a response from her.

She wriggled, fighting his hold, but not trying to hurt him.

With four protective older brothers, she had to know how to escape if she truly wanted to.

He released her mouth and kissed a path along her jaw, finding the sensitive skin behind her ear.

A shiver stopped her mid-wriggle. Her fingers dug into his shoulders.

Oh yes. Still kissing her ear, he lifted her to straddle him.

She sighed as she settled astride, turning her head to find his mouth with hers. The kiss was magic as their tongues dueled. She ran her hands down his chest.

He took the hint and found her breasts, shaping them through the uniform shirt she wore. Not enough. He unbuttoned the shirt, stopped and groaned. “Black lace.”

“No one was meant to see.”

He pushed the shirt open, cupping her beautiful breasts and rubbing his thumbs over the tight nipples. "I like looking." He glanced up and saw the shy arousal in her face, the pride and excitement. "I like looking at you very much." Using his thumbs, he eased the lace down to reveal her nipples. "Very, very much."

She jerked as he touched her bare nipples.

It felt so good to have the heat of her riding over him. Given her response, she had to be wet down there.

He kissed her fiercely, thrusting his tongue into her mouth as desire hardened him further. She caught his tongue and sucked it. It was his turn to jerk, to buck beneath her.

"Witch," he said thickly. He caught her arms and hauled her up. Kneeling, her breasts were near his mouth. He spread his hands against her shoulder blades, supporting her as he closed his mouth over one breast. He sucked and teased first one breast, then the other.

Why had he thought Yvie would be a silent lover?

"So wet. Hot. Harder. Ye-es. Gray, Gray." Urgently, as he switched breasts. He flicked the waiting, taut nipple. "Your tongue. Like a whip. Lash me, Gray."

The last command was too much for him. He used his teeth and she convulsed in his arms.

He breathed heavily as he held her against him. His heart was thundering and his jeans threatened to emasculate him.

"See, Gray. I'm not the Ms. Comfortable you're looking for."

He caught the whispered challenge.

"I think I can handle the excitement," he said.

Slowly, naturally sensuous, Yvie unraveled herself from him and curled up in her corner of the sofa. She watched him with huge eyes. "You ran once. Why should I trust you again?"

4. Chapter 4

Utilizing all the discipline of over a decade in the army, Gray got himself out of Yvie's apartment without responding to that last question. He could have shown her why she should trust him. Their chemistry was explosive. But trust was about more than sex.

He held his coat in front of him to hide his arousal, hoping the cold air outside would cool him down.

Sex with Yvie would be amazing, but they needed more than that.

He shook his head, grinning slightly as he threw his coat into the pick-up and climbed in after it. Man, he was getting old if he could deny himself sex for the greater good... although delaying the pleasure might be like that yoga thing. No, not yoga. What was it? Tantric sex. Yeah, he could do that.

He started the engine, slung an arm over the back of the seat and reversed out of the parking bay. Any sort of sex would be good with Yvie, but he wanted to be having it tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.

#

Upstairs at her window, Yvie watched Gray pull out of the car park.

So much for cool, independent, *disinterested*. She'd orgasmed in his arms while still mostly dressed. He hadn't undone *anything* of his.

She rested her forehead against the cool glass.

He had to think she was a pushover for him. Well, wasn't she? She had been four years ago.

But if he was confident of her, why hadn't he answered her last challenge? "Why should I trust you again?"

Trust. Taking that step beyond fear into the unknown.

She'd read once that the female orgasm was a sign of trust. According to that expert, it was a letting go, an expression or celebration of confidence in your partner. The pleasure of her orgasm remained with her, like hot syrup melting through her veins.

Gray could have taken her to bed. He could have had her on the sofa, small though it was. Why hadn't he? She'd felt his arousal, though she'd been too caught up in her own blazing response to steady her hands and unzip his fly and touch him.

A sharp stab of desire warned her of the danger of that sort of thinking. Lust had a way of fogging the issue so you didn't see the huge risk you were taking.

She was starting to believe his behavior was realistic. A handful of hours and she was falling for his talk of a relationship.

"Crazy." She moved away from the window. She and Gray hadn't exchanged more than casual conversation in four years. Yet she'd fallen into his kiss like a long-term lover.

Despite her doubts, a slow smile started. Christmas dinner this year would be interesting.

#

Yvie didn't have to wait till Christmas dinner to see Gray. When she walked out of her apartment block early the next morning, he was waiting in his pick-up. He got out as she walked down the front steps.

She couldn't help her smile or the ridiculous lightness of her heart. "What did you do, memorize my roster?"

"Yes." He came close, bent and kissed her briefly. Briefly but with intent. Every touch re-affirmed a bond between them. "I'll collect you after your shift, too."

She took the chance as she walked around to the passenger door to remind herself of commonsense.

"You can't rush me," she said as she buckled her seatbelt.

“What else can I do? Yesterday, I tripped on my tongue and told you how much I want you. I can’t—won’t—take that back, and with it hanging in the air between us, there’s no going slow.”

“It would be safer if we tried. Slow is good. You need to stop and think. I’m not the girl you knew four years ago. When you walked away at Sam’s wedding, I grew up. It took a while, but that moment was the catalyst. I was—am—spoiled, Gray. Not in the way other people might think with Dad and Mom having so much money. It’s that they and the boys always looked out for me. They cotton-wooled the world. I didn’t have to skin my knees on hard truths—until I wove dreams around you, and you walked away, horrified.”

“I’m sorry,” he said tensely.

“I don’t need your apology. I don’t think I even deserve one. My dreams were my problem. But I realized then that I had to break out of a cocoon of complacency. Life doesn’t give us everything we want. I had to work out what I really wanted and fight for it.”

There was a long beat of silence as she dealt with the rawness of being so honest.

“You didn’t fight for me,” Gray said finally.

“If you’d seen your expression at the wedding, you’d understand. You made it clear I wasn’t what you wanted, not that way.”

“And now? Now that you know I do want you?”

“I don’t know.”

#

When Gray collected Yvie at lunchtime—she’d had a morning shift—he offered to show her his house. “I’ll wait in the pick-up if you want to change out of your uniform first.”

“Thanks.” Her curiosity was too strong to resist the lure of seeing the house he’d bought—bought for her. It boggled the mind.

She changed swiftly into jeans and a warm red sweater and took the stairs back down, hurrying out to Gray’s car. If she took too long, commonsense might lock her up in her apartment. Visiting his house definitely wasn’t slowing things down.

But the house was beautiful. Sure, it needed work. The gutters needed

fixing. Everything needed painting. The windows were dull with grime and the garden was a wilderness.

“You’ve room for a swing chair on the front porch.”

He laughed. “You like it, then?”

“Of course.” She scrambled out of the pick-up, eager to see the inside.

The bones of the house were as welcoming as she’d suspected. While Gray pointed out battered walls and scarred floors, she saw the generously sized rooms, molded ceilings and fireplaces. “When they’re restored they’ll look gorgeous.” She ran a hand along a dusty mantelpiece.

“There are four of them.” He radiated pride of ownership. “The downside is that both bathrooms need renovating and the kitchen...” He pushed open a door.

“Oops.” She took in the horrors of the large kitchen. The space was good, but it was a disaster.

“Someone redid it in the ’eighties.”

“You should sue them.” The bench tops were lime green laminate and the floors a strange orange vinyl. One fake pine cupboard door hung askew. “But done up properly, it will be a lovely country kitchen. Gray, you are lucky. The house has so many possibilities.”

“That’s what I thought.” He hugged her from behind, his arms wrapping beneath her breasts. “I’m going to rip out the cupboards and open things up. An island bench here. A double sink beneath the window.”

The warmth of him surrounding her was a serious distraction. Her brain wandered off as he spoke, till he directed her towards the door.

“We’ll eat in the living room.”

Although bare, it was the cleanest room and the lightest, facing south. A fire was laid in the fireplace. Gray knelt and put a match to it. In a couple of minutes he’d coaxed it into a blaze. “If you watch that, I’ll get the food.”

Yvie fed kindling to the flames, not because they needed the extra fuel—Gray was an excellent fire starter—but for the fun of it. “I love a real fire,” she said as he returned.

“I remember.”

Their eyes met and held. How many discussions had they had in front of her parents’ fireplace?

She straightened up. “Can I help with anything?”

“It’s all under control.”

The furniture in the living room was minimal. A sofa and a folding table, two chairs, a television on another folding table. But Gray had prepared carefully for her visit. There was a loaf of fresh bread, butter, two types of cheese, ham, salami, smoked salmon.

“It all looks delicious.”

She was accustomed to Gray in control. The hint of tentativeness in his manner ensnared her. He wanted to impress her. And everything in the house spoke of his determination to build a future.

#

The stupid table had a wonky leg that rocked everything as soon as you moved, the windows lacked curtains and—despite the fire—the room was cold, but none of it mattered. Yvie was here, with him. Gray watched her layer cheese and ham on a slice of bread and take a bite.

She glanced up, caught him watching and smiled, just a crinkle of the eyes. It was an intimate smile, the sort of relaxed communication good friends shared. It simply appreciated sharing the moment.

“You know, you never told me about your childhood,” Yvie said.

He decided he didn’t want a third sandwich after all.

“Did you grow up in a house like this one, with a big yard and everything?”

“Not exactly.” He disliked sharing his past with people. It was an ordinary enough story, just pathetic. He’d moved on, made something of himself. But this was Yvie. If he wanted to build a future with her, then she had a right to know his past. He gulped some coffee. “I think I told you once my parents divorced?”

“Divorced and remarried.” She nodded. “You’ve got a half-brother and sisters. How many was it? Four?”

“Five. Dad married a third time. Divorced a third time, too.”

Her eyes widened and she sat back in her chair. “That bothers you.”

“I’m not like him. When I make a commitment, I keep it.”

She pushed away her sandwich and picked up her mug of coffee, cradling it between her hands. “How old were you when they divorced?”

“Three. I don’t remember them being together. Then again, I don’t

really have to. Any time they met, exchanging custody of me, they fought. That's how they were together. There's only one thing they ever agreed on."

"Yeah?"

"That they married too young. They were nineteen."

"Ah." She looked away from him, studying the flames. "So when you left me at Sam's wedding, you thought I was too young."

"Too young. Too nice for me. You grew up in a great family. Me, I didn't know if I could handle that sort of commitment."

"But now you think you can."

It wasn't a question, but he nodded anyhow. "I know who I am, now. What I want, what I'll do to keep it. I didn't grow up in an old house like this one. I grew up in new developments, shuffling between Mom and Dad and their new families."

"And the army wasn't any more stable," she said quietly. "This will be your first real home."

"Yes." She understood. He looked for pity in her eyes, and didn't find it. Some of the tension in his shoulders relaxed. He hadn't told her his story, ordinary as it was, to elicit pity. "Come here." He drew her out of her chair to stand in front of the fire with him.

#

Yvie went willingly into Gray's embrace. She was shaken by what he'd revealed. Not so much the story—sadly, neglected unwanted children weren't rare—but by the fact he'd trusted her with his past and his vulnerability. She snuggled closer.

As irresistibly sexy as she found him, this sort of intimacy had its own power. She breathed in the scent of him and felt his heartbeat through her body. His warmth and strength became her whole world, a world of promise.

Finally he sighed and eased her away. He smiled down at her. "I'd hoped to make out in front of the fire."

"Just make out?" she teased.

"Unfortunately, yes."

She blinked. "If this is about me being a nice girl..."

He shushed her with a finger to her lips. "It's not—though you are. I

don't want to rush things, and since I have to get you home, making out was about all I could hope for." He grinned. "And I did hope."

She blushed, remembering last night.

"I'll grab your coat." He released her with a final caress along her spine.

The fire had burned down. He put it out completely.

She grimaced at the wash of sooty water.

"It'll clean up. Leave the plates. I'll clean that up, too." He kissed her quickly, almost absently and hustled her into the pick-up.

"What's the rush?"

He hesitated a moment. "I have an appointment." He slammed shut the passenger door.

She recognized a brick wall when she hit one. But ouch it hurt, all the more for the closeness they'd just shared.

His silence on the drive was like a second slap. She thought of and discarded a dozen conversation starters.

Perhaps he regretted talking about his childhood.

She was relieved to see her apartment block. "Thanks for lunch." She unbuckled her seatbelt.

"I'll phone you, tonight," he said, suddenly urgent. It was as if he'd come back from a million miles away.

Her heart rebounded. She smiled. "I'd like that."

"Good." He returned her smile, leaned toward her and kissed her. "No matter how late, I'll call."

The light kiss tingled on her lips as she waited for the elevator. With the right man, every kiss was magic. Singing under her breath, knowing she was grinning goofily, she stepped out at her floor. At her door, she heard her phone ringing. She twisted the key in the lock—*hurry, hurry*—then slammed the door behind her.

"Ouch." She caught her knee against a packing box. "Hello?"

"Yvie, what the heck do you think you're doing?"

5. Chapter 5

“Dad?” Yvie leaned against the wall. “What do you mean, what the heck am I doing?” But she was stalling. She had a horrible feeling she knew what he meant.

“I’m talking about you packing up and leaving. How do you think I felt to find out from—What the heck? Yvie, I have to go. Something’s come up. Excitable fools everywhere at Christmas. But you, miss, are going to explain yourself.” He hung up.

She replaced the phone on its hook and slid down the wall. Deep inside, the first shivers started.

She wasn’t scared of her dad. That wasn’t what had started these shivers. She drew her knees up and hugged her arms around them as her dreams shattered.

How had her dad discovered her plans? *How do you think I felt to find out from—* From whom?

Her dad didn’t know her publisher or her doctoral advisor, and she’d sold her car privately.

“Face it,” she said harshly into the silence of her apartment.

Gray had hurried her home for an “appointment”, one he wouldn’t talk about. He disapproved of her travelling alone around New England. He wanted to her here, where he’d set up house. He was an army-trained

strategist and he knew her dad and how protective he was. Gray would probably say he'd informed her dad for her "own good".

"Like hell." She stood up and disconnected her phone, searched for her cell and switched it off, too.

Whatever emergency her dad was dealing with, she would bet it'd keep him occupied till too late to call around and argue with her. Christmas was when all the crazies came out—and the security business had to handle them. Her dad would save the interrogation for Christmas dinner.

In turning off the phones, the person she was avoiding was Gray.

This was her own fault.

She moved restlessly around the living room.

Despite the lesson he'd taught her four years ago, she'd wanted to trust him. If she'd truly not cared about Gray, she'd have kept him out of her apartment when he first drove her home. He wouldn't have seen the packing boxes and she wouldn't have told him of her plans. She wouldn't have *trusted* him with her dreams.

Aargh. You couldn't scream in frustration in an apartment—not without alarming the neighbors.

Yvie stripped of her clothes, pulled on exercise gear and went down to the basement to the shared gym. The punching bag and treadmill could deal with her anger. Anger was healthy.

She wasn't about to admit that no gym equipment in the world could handle heartbreak.

#

"I'm not talking to you." Yvie stared straight forward as Gray met her outside the apartment block in the morning. She'd half expected him to have the nerve to show up last night.

"Is that why you didn't answer your phone last night?"

"Yes."

"Why? Because I'm rushing you? Did you get spooked realizing how serious I am?"

"You could say that." If by serious he meant he was willing to use any and all tactics against her. If by serious he meant he was willing to betray her trust.

"Then we'll slow things down. You set the pace."

She cast him a look of scorn.

He grabbed her arm and her own momentum whirled her around to face him. "I'm willing to put up with a lot, but not the silent treatment and nasty looks." The harshness left his face and voice. "Tell me what's wrong, sweetheart."

Her lower lip wobbled and she pressed her lips sternly together. The hypocrite actually sounded concerned and caring.

"At least get in the car so I can drive you to work."

She shook her head, and when she pulled away, he let her. The bus arrived at the stop when she did. She plodded on and found a seat, but her treacherous subconscious chose a seat at the window where she could see Gray.

He stood watching the bus, watching her.

The distance was too great to read his expression, but the determination of his stance was evident. She looked down at her hands. She had to be determined, too, for her own good.

#

It was a relief to dive into the busy-ness of work. As the mall packed with people, Yvie lost herself in re-uniting kids with parents, answering questions and, less positively, nabbing two thieves. Looking at the elderly thief's shabby coat and air of desperation, her heart twisted. She had a lot to be thankful for.

The evacuation alarm came out of nowhere. Her radio crackled into urgent life. "Fire in the south wing. Explosions in camping store. Keep everyone calm, but get them out."

It was a near impossible order. People were here to SHOP and weren't about to let an alarm stop them. "It's just a practice drill."

"No, ma'am. It's not. If you'll move to the exit near the restrooms, to the left as you exit the store..."

Barry, an older guard, came to help. "I was early for my shift." He always was. Yvie guessed he got lonely, home alone. He cupped his hands to his mouth. "Move, folks! The fire's real."

"They'll panic," she objected.

"Not yet. Trust me. You want them out before they smell the smoke. *Then* they'll panic."

She redoubled her efforts to keep people calm, but moving. They actually began cooperating, albeit with grumbles and the occasional hysterical shriek, mostly from toddlers separated from toys and the line to see Santa.

“A good crowd,” Barry said as they rounded up the last stragglers. “More sense than most of them.”

Yvie sniffed the air. She could smell smoke.

“Ya know, it was an idiot in the camping store. Reckoned he’d test a stove. Don’t know how he managed it. The dang thing exploded. Set off a chain reaction.”

Ex-cops. Yvie swore they could snatch information out of thin air. “I think that’s everyone.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much,” Barry said awkwardly. “He’ll be okay.”

“Who?” Mentally she ran through the drill, checking they hadn’t missed anything.

“Gray. He asked where the nearest camping store was. Said he wanted to buy a traveler’s cooking set.”

Her heart jolted to a stop. “Gray was in the camping store?”

“I reckon as he must have been. But he’s the tough sort. He’ll be fine.”

She couldn’t even contact him. Her cellphone was back in the locker room. “He’s the kind that would go back to help. He could be hurt.”

Barry caught her shoulder. “Yvie, you have to do your job.”

“What?” She stared at him.

“I shouldn’t have told you. My fault. But you have your job to do, here. Let Gray look out for himself.”

I can’t. But she had to. This was about people’s lives, people depending on her. This was duty. *How the hell did Gray and her brothers handle it?*

She focused grimly on each task at hand. One foot after the other. *Don’t think about Gray.* Not Gray who’d been buying a traveler’s cooking set—for her? *Don’t scream at the customers who now, belatedly, felt the need to panic.*

Finally she was at the evacuation point with emergency vehicles’ flashing lights adding to the surreal chaos.

“Go now,” Barry said.

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve got this. Everyone’s out and safe, the door’s secure. I’ll check in with Thaddeus, let him know I’m taking over from you.” He tapped his radio. “Go.”

She went.

People asked questions as she wove through the crowd. She answered as best she could, mostly vague reassurance, and kept on going.

Ivan, another guard, was holding people back from the south wing. Here the devastation was obvious. Flames licked along the roofline even as firefighters poured in the water. Windows had blown out.

“Gray?” she asked.

But Ivan didn’t know Gray and was impatient of her question. He had his hands full with people pressing forward, wanting to take photos. “Freakin’ ghouls.”

She ought to stay and help him, but from the corner of her eye... she slipped away, heading for the line of ambulances.

Gray sat on a tailgate. A paramedic was assessing him.

“Yvie.” He tried to stand up, but the middle-aged paramedic pushed him back down.

She was brisk, practical and too busy to stand any nonsense. “I think it’s mostly your hands.”

Yvie looked down at them. “Oh God.” She wavered on her feet.

Gray reached for her, flinched and swore.

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” the paramedic spared a few moments for kindness. “Superficial burns. They’ll hurt like hell, but they’ll heal. You free to drive him to hospital?”

“Yes.” And before Gray could protest. “Barry’s filling in for me, and the police are taking over, anyway.”

“All right.” His face was strained under the covering of soot. “Keys in my pocket and my cell. Call your Mom. Let her know you’re okay.”

She nodded. This close to him, she smelled the fire on him, mixed with sweat. She shuddered at how nearly she’d lost him.

“Hey Mom? Just me. There’s been a fire at the mall. I’m okay. Really. I’m taking Gray to hospital. No, he’s okay.” Her breath hitched, not quite a sob. “He burnt his hands, probably playing hero.”

He grinned faintly.

“Yeah, Mom. I’ve got to go. Love you.” She opened the passenger door of Gray’s pick-up and watched him clamber in. No hands made everything tough. She clicked the seatbelt for him.

“Sweetheart.” Their faces were close. “Kiss me.”

She did. It was what she craved, this fundamental reassurance of life.

He held his hands cautiously to one side while their mouths said everything their bodies couldn’t and their hearts didn’t dare. Heat, hope, need, commitment.

Finally, she drew back.

“Whatever was wrong this morning,” Gray said. “We’ll fix it.”

She nodded, barely able to remember last night’s suspicions and the morning’s fight. “First, we’ll fix your hands.”

#

By the time Gray got out of hospital, he was wiped. They’d given him something for the pain and all he wanted was to go home and collapse. Correction. All he wanted was to go home with Yvie and collapse.

She was waiting for him outside the cubicle, looking lost, then fiercely relieved to see him. “I’ll go get your pick-up. I had to park a bit of a distance after I dropped you off.”

He shook his head. “I’ll walk with you.” He wanted out of the hospital. Too many bad memories.

“Is it just your hands or do you have burns anywhere else?”

“Just my hands.”

“Ok then.” She slipped in against him, putting an arm around his waist. “Put your arm over my shoulder. Is that comfortable?”

To hold her close, he’d have put up with actual pain. “It’s good.”

“I was talking with a couple of salespeople. They said you went back to get a kid out and burnt your hands putting out his hair.” She shivered against him. “His hair was on fire.”

“Her hair, and it was only her hair. I checked. She’s fine.” He was relieved to slump into the passenger seat of the pick-up. He turned his head to watch her as she reversed out of the parking bay. “I got the job, yesterday.”

“What job?”

The pain meds were making him woozy, his thoughts disconnected. “That appointment that I left you for, that made you so angry this morning. I wanted the contract ’cause I can do it anywhere. Could travel.”

Her words reached him from a long way away. “You were interviewing for a job? Fudge. Way to make me feel bad. I thought... Dad phoned. He’d discovered my plans to travel around on my own. I thought you’d told him.”

“No.” His tongue felt thick. He balanced the backs of his hands carefully on his lap. Now he let his head drop back against the headrest. He closed his eyes. “You’re not travelling alone.”

“I’m not?”

He knew she’d be annoyed. He didn’t care. “With me.”

#

She woke him up at the house. Not that he’d really been sleeping. More like zonked out. Damn. So much for being a tough guy. He should have slept last night instead of spending the night knocking out the kitchen cupboards and worrying over the problem of Yvie and his stupidity in rushing her.

Now she was fussing around him and that was much better. “Are you going to stay with me? My hands.” He held up the bandaged evidence. “I’ll need a bit of help.” Though he could cope if he had to.

“Of course I’m staying with you.”

He smiled and let her fuss him into bed. He heard her talking on the phone to her mom. An hour later, Mrs. Harrison arrived with clothes for Yvie and drinking straws for him. He cracked an eye open, then went back to sleep.

Yvie was here. The rest could wait till his brain was functioning again.

6. Chapter 6

Yvie abandoned the kitchen as a disaster zone. If she needed evidence as to the effect of her going incommunicado the previous night, it was here. Gray had demolished the old benches and cupboards. Tiles had cracked off the walls and splinters of wood lay on the ripped vinyl floor. She set up a makeshift kitchen in the living room with the kettle on the folding table and the toaster beside it.

“Morning.” Gray stood in the doorway. He looked rough.

“Good morning. Coffee?”

“Please.” He walked in and sat down. “I need a shower.”

“Can you manage it?” She tried to fight a blush. “Mom suggested a couple of plastic bags over your hands held on with elastic bands at the wrists. But if you can’t put pressure on your hands...?”

“A couple of fingertips are functional.”

She busied herself with the coffee, adding plenty of milk to Gray’s mug—and a straw.

He grimaced.

“It’s practical,” she said.

He bent his neck to suck at the straw. “I feel like an idiot.”

“Do you want jam on your toast?”

“Aren’t you going to give me a chance to grumble first?” He grinned.

“When you’ve eaten. You need something in your stomach so you can take your pain pills. Then you can have your shower.”

“I can tell you’ve thought it through.”

She cut his toast into small triangles and he managed to pick them up, clumsily.

“I heard you last night,” he said. “You thought I’d tattled to your dad.”

She sighed. “It wasn’t one of my finer moments. I talked to mom. What actually happened was my landlord is one of Dad’s friends. He mentioned to Dad that I’d given up my lease. That was all Dad was asking about. I just leapt to conclusions. False ones. I’m sorry.”

“You’re forgiven.”

“That easily?”

“The way I see it, you were reacting to the pressure I put on you. I was rushing you.”

“No.” It was strange having a serious conversation with a man juggling toast and sucking coffee through a straw, but she wanted everything cleared up. She wanted the future he’d been talking about. “Four years isn’t rushing things, Gray. If anything, you’ve been too slow.”

He abandoned his breakfast, staring at her with hard, questioning eyes.

She smiled at him, understanding his fear to hope. “The house is impressive and I can’t say I’m not glad you’re out of the army and all its danger, but the important thing is you. I love you, Gray.”

He bumped his right hand on the table, cursed and shook it. “Damn it, Yvie. You choose your moments.”

“I don’t want to waste any more time.”

“Then come here.”

#

At Christmas dinner, Yvie cut up Gray’s roast beef and potatoes. He could just about manage the greens on his own.

The large dining table at her parents’ house, with its extra leaves added, held their family and friends.

“So what’s this about Yvie traipsing around New England?” her grandfather demanded from three seats down.

“Relax, Pops.” Her brother Paul beat her to answering. “Yvie’s taking a bodyguard along.”

Every eye at the table settled on Gray. He smiled.

“I guess he’ll do,” Pops said gruffly.

“I know he will,” Yvie said, and added wickedly, under her breath so only Gray could hear. “I’ve taken him for a test drive.”

Gray choked on potato.

About the Author

Jenny Schwartz is an Australian author, currently mis-using her history degree to write steampunk. She also writes contemporary and paranormal romance, and is published with Carina Press and Escape Publishing.

Jenny is an inspired cook (i.e. seldom uses a recipe) and a wonderful gardener (what do you mean those are weeds? they have flowers) and a talented dog trainer (Toby, sit. Sit. Sit!). You'll find more information about Jenny and her books at her website, <http://authorjennyschwartz.com/>

Want More?

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