

A Charleston Christmas Miracle

Sandra Courey has worked as an exotic dancer for the past seven years after moving from Connecticut to Charleston, South Carolina to escape her family and her ex. Stowing away as much of her paycheck as possible, Sandy's plan is to make a new start in a new state at the beginning of the new year.

Ross Billings is the main caregiver for his niece, Rose. In between working as a theater manager, he does his best to give the eight-year-old as normal a life as possible around her mentally ill mother and her heart defect. Rose's biggest dream is to play Marie in the Nutcracker, but Ross is giving up hope that it can ever happen.

Seeing Sandy doing a few basic ballet moves out on Folly Beach, Rose decides she is perfect to play the part of her uncle's snow/sand princess.

Note: This novella is a temporarily free version of a novella that will be published as part of Christmas in July in 2019. It is part of the Dancers & Lighthouses series. Sandy is a minor character in *Pier Lights*, the first of the series, also set in Charleston/Folly Beach. It does contain minor spoilers for *Pier Lights*.

Please do not share this eBook. If you enjoy the read, consider leaving a review once it is available for pre-order. Word of mouth is an author's lifeblood.

Christmas Miracle in Charleston. ©LK Hunsaker writing as Ella M. Kaye. 2018 Edition, not for sale. All Rights Reserved.

This is a work of fiction, for entertainment purposes only. Any resemblance to actual people is unintended. Author/Publisher is not responsible for use of any context or content in the story used for purposes other entertainment.

Chapter One

December first and seventy-six degrees.

Calm gray-green waves slid up over the damp sand, up over Sandra's bare feet. At least the water was chilled for the season. The seagulls yelling to each other up in the light blue cloud-streaked sky paid no attention to the fact they should have turned into calling birds or penguins or something more appropriate. How many Christmases now had Sandy spent in South Carolina rather than up in Connecticut where Christmas season looked and felt like Christmas? Where drinking hot chocolate, or hot toddies made sense? A hot toddy with peppermint and a sprinkle of cinnamon sounded perfect. Except that it was seventy-six degrees and she found not one ounce of actual Christmas spirit anywhere within or without.

Honing in on the music drifting across the sand from some young kid sitting on a beach chair playing on his phone while ignoring the girl beside him, Sandy closed her eyes and felt the music, the heavy raucous beat, a song she didn't know and wouldn't bother to try to find, and moved with it, there on the wet hard-packed sand of Folly Beach.

It was not ballet music, but she liked the dissonance of doing classical ballet to modern pop or rock. An arabesque was easy enough. Releveés were somewhat harder, since her toes sank into the sand with that much pinpointed weight. She was able to manage passable pique turns along the edge of the water, with it lapping up onto her feet, until she stepped on the wrong side of a shell, cursed, and picked it up to throw back in

the water where it belonged.

“Hey, there are kids on the beach. Do you mind?”

Sandy swiveled to the deep male voice, ready to tell him to mind his own business, but there was a child beside him. A young child. Maybe five or six, the girl had a small pinched face and narrow eyes, made up for by bright red hair. Her long curls darn near glowed under the sun beneath a too-big Santa hat hanging down to the back of her knees that were bare under her red, green, and white plaid jumper dress. Finally, a sign of Christmas spirit.

She made herself apologize although it was never an easy thing for her to do. Too defensive, she'd been told. Protective, she always countered. But she spoke to the little Christmas elf, not to the man Sandy assumed was her father, or at least the baby daddy.

“It's okay.” The girl threw a dazzling smile. “He says worse. He just doesn't know I hear him.”

The man opened his mouth to speak and closed it again with a grimace. “Guess I'll have to be more careful, too.”

“Don't worry. I don't tell Mom.”

“Well, thank you for that, but how about you don't repeat it, either?”

“I don't.” The girl shrugged and turned back to Sandy. “I'm Rosalyn, but I go by Rose. This is my uncle Ross. I'm named after him.”

Uncle, not father? Of course, that could still mean he was the partner of the girl's mother. Sandy detested women who had their kids call their man of the moment “uncle,” but she knew it happened often. Curious, she studied the guy. By his voice, she would have guessed he was a much older man, but he looked not too much older than she was, maybe late twenties. He had the same tone of red in his blond hair as the girl, but more understated, with more brown thrown in. It tossed around

freely over his shoulders, but he was clean shaven with a square face and a strong nose. He reminded her of a lion. Could be he was her actual uncle, with the resemblance.

When his eyebrows rose, thick eyebrows that added to the lion effect, Sandy flushed. He'd caught her studying him too long. "Um, hi. Sandra Courey." She offered her hand to the girl, unsure she'd do the same for *Uncle Ross* until he offered his first. He did, so she accepted. He had a nice, strong but easy grip.

"Ross Billings." His eyes held hers. Blue-green eyes with brownish-yellow flecks. An odd color, as though they couldn't decide which DNA strand to use. Or maybe it was the sun interfering. "You're a dancer."

Her stomach clenched. "Um." She glanced at the girl but returned to those odd blue eyes. "You've seen me dance?"

"Uh, yeah. Just now. You were..."

"Oh. That." Allowing her lungs to take in the breath she'd blocked, Sandy shrugged. "No, not really. I study on my own now and then, with videos, you know, but I'm not..."

"It was awesome!" The girl smiled again. "I take dance, too. I used to, not right now. Someday I'm going to be Marie in the Nutcracker. Uncle Ross takes me to see it every year."

"How nice." Sandy focused on the water brushing against her feet.

"Do you like it, too? It's my favorite story of all time."

"I've heard it's wonderful, and I do love the music. But isn't the girl's name Clara?"

"Sometimes it is. But Balanchine says it's Marie, so it's Marie."

"Balanchine?"

"The choreographer." The man eyed her as though she was some kind of fake. He was a good people reader, Sandy supposed. "You're a

dancer who's never seen the Nutcracker ballet and doesn't know who Balanchine is?"

"I know who he is. I'm surprised she does, that's all, at her age. As I said, I'm not really a dancer, not that kind of dancer, anyway, and no, I haven't seen it. Someday, I might." She saw those eyebrows raise again at her 'that kind' comment. Maybe he was a very good people reader.

"You should come with us!" Rosalyn looked up at her uncle with wide eyes. "Ask her to come. She should see it, too. Everyone should see it."

"Rosie, she doesn't even know us. You can't ask a stranger to go do something with you. How often have I told you?" With a shrug, he met Sandy's eyes. "She's ridiculously friendly, and no matter how often I explain what *stranger* means, she doesn't get it."

"That's sweet."

"It's terrifying."

"Yes, that, too. I'm sure." Sandy couldn't help a grin at his expression that said the girl exasperated him but he was also fully enamored of her. "Thank you, Rose, but I wouldn't dare. Your uncle is right, you know."

"It's okay. He looks gruff when he wants to, but he's really nice. He'd never bother you."

Ross rolled his eyes. "Rose. Stop now, please."

Sandy chuckled. "Gruff? Is that a word kids know?"

"She's a big reader, and she hears everything."

"And I'm older than I look. Everyone thinks I'm like five years old, but I'm nearly eight. I'm just short and I have a baby face, like my mom. I'm smart, too. I understand things, even if people think I don't."

"I bet you do, and I bet everyone treats you way too young, right?"

Sandy was too entirely charmed by the girl.

“Yes. It’s so annoying.”

“I understand. I’m the baby of six kids, all boys except me. I never got to do anything while they ran wild and did whatever they pleased.”

“That’s not fair.”

“No, it wasn’t fair, but now I do what I please and take care of myself just fine. Someday, you’ll show them. Right?” *Fine* was maybe not quite accurate. For nearly seven years, she’d been working a job that made her have to shower in near-scalding water every night when she got home just to wash off the idea of it before she could fitfully sleep. She had her own place, paid her own bills, and didn’t have to rely on anyone, though. And she was tough. She’d made herself tough after a childhood of being too sheltered on one hand and too much left to fend for herself against her rowdy brothers on the other hand. So she was fine enough.

Ross’s expression now told her she’d said something she shouldn’t have, but Sandy couldn’t figure out what it might be. Little ones needed to understand things changed as they got older, that eventually, their lives and choices would be their own. More of them needed to know as much. She wish she’d been told as much.

“Okay, Rose. Let her be now. Come on...” Ross took the girl’s hand to try to lead her away.

She didn’t budge. Instead, she tilted her head. “You don’t have a husband or a boyfriend?”

“Rose, mind your own business. If you plan to build a snowman, you better get to it before we have to go.”

“A snowman?” Sandy looked around at the sand and water and sunbathers laid out enjoying the December heat.

“Technically, a sand man, but she insists it can still be called a

snowman.” He held up a bag and opened it to show a red and green scarf, some rocks and sticks, plus a carrot. “This is her own Christmas tradition. She insists someday, she’ll spend Christmas in the snow, although her mother, my sister, absolutely refuses. She hates cold. She doesn’t even go outside in the evenings here during the winter because it’s too cold.”

“But you can take me someday.” The child pleaded with her uncle and Sandy wondered how on earth he could ever say no to that look.

“I can’t take you from your mom on Christmas. You’re all she has.”

“She needs a boyfriend or a husband so she doesn’t only have me. And you. She has you, too.”

“Yes, she has me, too. And no matter how old you think you are already, you have no need to be thinking about such things.” Ross rubbed the girl’s shoulder. “Go on now and get your snowman built. I’ll have to take you home soon so I can get to work.”

“Do you want to help?” Rose grabbed Sandy’s hand and looked up at her with that same ‘you can’t deny me’ expression.

“Roselyn. Stop now and let go of her. I’m sure she has better things to do than build a snowman out of sand.” Those eyes caught hers. “I’m so sorry. We’ll leave you alone now.”

“No, it’s fine. And... well, if you’re sure and it won’t bother your uncle, I would love to help. It’s been years since I built sand castles, but I might remember the technique enough to help with your snowman.”

Ross glanced at her, then away, at his niece. “You don’t have to give in to the child just because she asked. She understands *no* very well and she’ll be fine with it.”

“If you’d rather I didn’t, I understand. I understand *no* well, also.”

“No. *No*, it’s...” A flash of embarrassment covered his face and he

moved his gaze out to the horizon. “It’s fine if you want to, but don’t feel like you have to just because she asked and she’s persuasive.”

For some reason, his embarrassment tempered her normal wariness, and the likelihood that she’d be sarcastic, one of her best protective instincts. “I’d love to help. If you’re sure it’s okay.” Sandy caught the question in his eyes, but Rose was tugging her hand, so she followed, whether or not he actually wanted her to help.

With Rose running back and forth to get water to wet down the sand, Sandy helped her shape it into a large ball. Ross was given the job of packing it tight enough to hold together and, while doing so, he often reached over Sandy’s arms, nearly touching his body against hers. He kept his gaze on his work, but the scent of warm male and some kind of sensual masculine aftershave she couldn’t place infused her senses. Was he noticing her scent? Would it be as appealing as his was? She never added scent when going to the beach, since she didn’t want to attract insects, or male attention, for that matter. So if he smelled her, it would be however she naturally smelled ... or body odor.

Sandy hoped she did not smell of body odor. Of course, with as close as he kept getting, she had to assume she didn’t.

When they had a second medium-sized ball and a third small ball formed, Rose stood back and looked at it. “This is the tricky part. Sometimes we have to do it over and over until it doesn’t break. This one goes on first, then the little one on top.” She bent down on one side of the medium ball while Ross crouched on the other side.

“Maybe six hands would work better than four?” Sandy positioned herself between the two of them and they moved to even it out. Rose counted to three and said, “Now,” and slowly, they lifted the thing and shuffled over to set it atop the other, releasing it gently. Surprisingly, it

held together, although it was slightly lopsided.

“Okay. Time for the big test.” Ross started to pick up the smallest one and Sandy jumped in to help, for stability of the sand. Together, they managed to get it propped on top with no cracks anywhere.

“One time! Look, Uncle Ross! Just one time and we did it!” Rose jumped up and down at a safe distance from the creation in progress.

He gave the girl a smile and looked over at Sandy. “Guess you were right. Six hands is a good number. Here you go, Rosie.” He pulled three white rocks from the bag and Rose put them along the front of the middle ball as buttons. With a boost from Ross, she added the small, thin carrot for a nose, and pressed macaroni painted white in a curve for the mouth. “Can Sandy do the hat this year since she helped us?” Rose took the Santa hat from her head.

With Ross’s agreement, Sandy accepted the thing and carefully propped it on the sand snowman’s head. “Tada. I didn’t even break it. Knock on wood.”

Ross gave her a smile and handed Rose a pair of broken sunglasses. “Here you go. One more pair put to good use.” Explaining that he always went through sunglasses like crazy, losing, dropping, or sitting on them, and Rose always saved them for “a good use,” he helped move the sand around to hold them where the eyes would be.

Rose fished long sticks out of the bag and stuck them in the sides for arms, and then pulled out the red and green plaid scarf.

“You don’t think Mr. Snowman will be hot enough in this South Carolina weather without a scarf?” Sandy accepted one side of it to help wrap it around the large neck.

“He has to wear a scarf because someday he’ll be up in the snow where it’s cold.”

“Well, I have news for you. If you go out in nothing but a scarf and a hat in a northern winter, Mr. Sand Snowman would freeze stiff.” With a bit of a throaty chuckle coming from Ross, Sandy rolled her eyes. “So to speak.” She returned her attention to Rose. “In case you didn’t know.”

Her eyes got wide. “You’ve been in the snow for Christmas?”

“Often. I was raised in Connecticut. It was ridiculously cold in the winter. Some days, it wasn’t safe to even step outside without every part of you well covered.” She glanced at Ross, a warning, or a return private adult joke. Sandy wasn’t sure how she meant it.

“Even your face?”

“Even your face. So really, this isn’t so bad, even if it’s not really snowman weather and doesn’t feel too much like Christmas.”

Rose frowned slightly as she studied her sand snowman. “I could still look at it through the window without freezing, though.”

“Yes, you could do that, especially if you have a big fire roaring in the fireplace.” Sandy smiled and wanted to hug her, but she wouldn’t dare.

“Someday I’m building a real snowman, even if I have to go by myself when I’m older.”

Ross’s eyes, those odd blue-green eyes, shifted from humor to withheld pain. “Okay, sweetie. We need to go. Tell Ms. Courey bye for now and maybe we’ll run into her again.”

Rose sighed a big sigh. “Okay. Will you be here again?”

“I’m here a lot. Folly Beach is my recharge place.”

“Like a tablet battery?”

“Yeah, like that. Anyway, I hope I’ll see you again.”

“Me, too.” Rose accepted her uncle’s hand, but kept her feet planted. “We’re going to the Sunday show of the Nutcracker. It’s at two o’clock. If you go, maybe we’ll see you. You should go.”

“Oh. Thank you, but tickets are probably sold out, so...”

“Uncle Ross can get you one. Can’t you?” She looked up at him.

Before Sandy could object, he shrugged. “I can, if you’re actually interested. But again, if you’re busy or don’t want to, say so.”

“I um...” Sandy badly wanted to accept, but it was Rose asking, not Ross, and she didn’t want him to feel like he had to agree to help her with a ticket just because the adorable little cherub was still looking at her like her heart would break if she refused. Still, she was a stranger and if Ross knew what she did for a living, he wouldn’t be offering...

“You know Marie’s parents thought she was only dreaming about the Nutcracker Prince turning real, but it wasn’t a dream. It was real. And she went to live in a big beautiful palace, although they thought she just disappeared. She didn’t disappear. She was happy and she danced every day and she had delicious food every day and she had snow when she wanted it and warm sun when she wanted it. Someday, I’ll be Marie.”

Ross ran a hand through his reddish brownish blond hair with a frown. “We have to go, Rosie.” He looked at Sandy. “If you want, I’ll leave a ticket at the door. You can pick it up when you get there. She’d be glad to see you.”

“Oh. No, I couldn’t impose. Really.”

“It’s no problem. It would make her happy. Yes, I spoil her rotten, and she knows it.” Pain reflected in his eyes as he ran a hand over his niece’s head.

“Uncle Ross runs the theater. He can always get tickets. I even get to watch them practice.”

He ran the theater? No wonder he could afford to spoil the girl.

“I work there. I don’t run it. So it won’t cost me anything to leave a ticket if you want it, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“She wants to come, Uncle Ross. I know she wants to come.” Rose yanked on her uncle’s hand.

“Okay, Rosie. Okay. I already offered.”

“No, but not just at the door. I want her to sit with us. Please.”

“It’s fine with me, but don’t be pushy with Ms. Courey. You know your manners better than that.”

“Sandy.” She caught his eyes. “Ms. Courey is my mother-in-law. And yes, she insists on Ms. even though she’s been married forever.”

“Mother-in-law?”

“Ex. I was married very briefly. A huge mistake. It’s why I left Connecticut. Anyway... I really don’t want you to do this only because this little girl is too awful charming and has you wrapped around her finger, as she obviously does. Not a criticism, but I think you might not want to ... well... be seen with me. Publicly. So...”

“Why?”

“I’m...” Sandy couldn’t say it in front of the girl, with a glance at Rose to tell him she didn’t want to say more.

“It’s fine.”

Her stomach tightened. It wasn’t fine. He was a gentleman through and through. It showed in his whole mannerism, the way he stood, the way he spoke, the way he dressed so casually in long khaki shorts and a tee but still nice quality clothes, the way he addressed her. When he found out she was a stripper at DanceOtica, he’d turn tail and run, as all decent men did, at least the ones who thought of themselves as more decent than anyone else. “I’m sorry, Rose, but I should go now. Thank you for the invitation. It was very sweet, but I can’t...”

“I know where you work, Sandy. Really, it’s fine.” Those odd eyes stared into hers. Not embarrassed any longer, but knowing. Daring...

“And she’s not that sheltered. As she said, she understands things well. I’ve maybe treated her a bit too old for her age, but I prefer that than too naïve. So don’t refuse to come for that reason.”

Sandy froze as his gaze held her, as though she was the snowman Rose had just built, except in actual snow, in twenty below zero. A cold shiver ran through her spine. He knew? How?

“You’re an incredible dancer.”

Her head nodded of its own accord and she couldn’t answer him.

“Honestly, we’d love to have you meet us Sunday.”

And then it hit her. That’s why he was being so generous. Any “decent” man who didn’t turn away from her after finding where she worked only wanted one thing. They figured she was an easy mark, a cheap date in every sense of the word. Anger flushed through her body, starting as it always did, in her chest, and rising up her neck into her cheeks.

“Hey Rosie, you know what you forgot on your snowman?” Ross rubbed the child’s hair. “His feet. You always give him feet.”

“Oh!” She started away but stopped. “Do I have time?”

“Go ahead. I’ll call and say I’ll be late. It’s okay this time, but don’t think you can make a habit of it.” Ross watched the girl run back over to the water to get more sand wet, and kept an eye on her while he turned back to Sandy. “I thought we might want this conversation a bit more private. So anyway, if that’s why you think I shouldn’t be seen with you, I know you’re an exotic dancer. I’ve seen you there. And yes, the offer is still open. If there’s another reason...”

“If you’re thinking I’ll be a cheap date, and you know how I mean that, think again. I’m not. Some of the girls are, and they all think I am, but I’m not what they think.” She cursed herself silently for how stupid

that sounded. It sounded defensive. And juvenile.

“Okay, I get it, but I’m not hitting on you. Anyway, I’m not trying to take advantage as I’m quite sure plenty of men do. Try, I mean. I mean, I’m sure they try.”

“Uh huh. I should go.” Sandy turned away. People could say anything. She’d heard it all. She’d been lied to often enough.

“I’m a friend of Dio’s.”

Dio? Her Dio? Not hers. He’d gone off and married that lame girl...

“And Caroline’s. I’m the one who hired them away from DanceOtica. They work for me, for the theater. I do the casting. Their talent needed a better audience. We’ve become friends over the past couple of years. Rose adores Dio and she helps entertain their little ones. Feisty little ones, not surprisingly.”

Sandy turned back. “Dio has kids?”

“Three. Triplets. All boys.”

Dio had kids. Her Dio. The one she wanted.

Ross ambled closer, studying her. “You’re one of Dio’s fans.”

“I’m... We worked together. You actually hang out with him? With ... her?”

He grinned. “A little jealous of Caroline? Guess I couldn’t blame you after seeing Dio’s act.”

Sandy felt her face heat up and turned away. She had to get away from him. He was definitely a good people reader.

“Hey, it’s fine. Honestly. I’m only teasing.” He took her side and lowered his voice, studying her face. “Come to the ballet, Sandy. They’ll be there, too. So you won’t...”

“No. Thank you. I definitely can’t...”

“You’re so taken with him, you can’t stand the thought of seeing

him?”

“No. I’m... Caroline and I are not exactly on the best of terms. At least not when she left. I haven’t seen her. But...”

“Because of Dio.”

“No.” She raised her chin. “Because we were competing for the same spot and I nearly had it before she came and took over with her fancy trained dance moves. I can’t say I was very nice about it, since I’d been there for three years and worked my ass off to get that spot and she just wanders in off the street and takes it. I can’t help that I never had lessons. It wasn’t right. And I know she thinks I was sleeping with Hayes for that spot, but I wasn’t. So, no, I can’t accept your invitation, but thank you. I’m going to go now. I’m glad Dio’s doing well and I hope he’s happy. He’s a good guy. One of the few actually good guys left out there. No offense.”

Before he could answer, Sandy jogged away from them, from Dio’s buddy and that sweet little girl who did get to take dance class and was entirely spoiled by her doting uncle and who would someday be Marie in the Nutcracker. Clara. The girl’s name was Clara, never mind Balanchine and his decision to just change the girl’s name. Who gave him the right? How many dancers had the great Balanchine slept with while they were trying to climb their way up to principle dancer, or prima ballerina as they were called then? Not that she knew for sure, but not like it would be anything unusual, either, since too many dancers were plenty willing to get there however it took, and too many men in management positions were willing to take full advantage of that. Who cares what name he’d given the girl?

Someday Rose would play Clara, or Marie, and ... and disappear like in the ballet? She’d said Marie disappeared. No, she said Marie’s parents

thought she disappeared, but she was living in a castle ... a castle in the air. She planned to marry a prince? Good luck with that. Sandy felt her eyes roll at the thought.

“Wait!” Little hands grasped hers. “Don’t go.” Rose pleaded, making her narrow eyes rounder. “Uncle Ross is taking me to lunch before he goes to work. You have to come.”

“Rose, thank you. But no, I really can’t.” She crouched to be on the girl’s level and did her best to pay no attention to the man peering down at her from behind Rose. “You’re a very sweet girl and I’m glad I met you, but I have to go now. Have fun at the Nutcracker and work hard on your lessons and someday you’ll be a fantastic Marie. I know you will. If I see your name posted, I’ll come watch you in it. Okay?”

Ross cleared his throat and gave Sandy a quick shake of his head.

The constant smile faded off Rose’s face. “I can’t really be in *The Nutcracker*. Not for real. But I can still watch it and pretend I will be.”

Sandy wanted to ask why, but Ross’s look said she shouldn’t. “Well, I’ll tell you a secret. I wanted to be Clara, too, back when I was little, and I couldn’t, either. That’s why I’ve never seen it. It would make me miss what I couldn’t do.”

“Why? You would have been a good Clara. I know you would.”

“I wasn’t allowed to take lessons when I was young enough, and now I’m too old.”

“I wouldn’t let that stop me, if I could get too old. I would do it, anyway. And sometimes Clara is a grown up, not a child, so you still could...”

Ross pulled the girl into a hug. “Come on, Rosie. Let her be. How about we get tacos from Taco Boy and take some to your mom, too?”

“But Sandy has to come.”

“She doesn’t want to come.”

“Yes, she does. She’s only afraid. I need to teach her not to be afraid like I’m not anymore. She has to come.”

“Rose...”

“She *has* to come, Uncle Ross. She *has* to.”

Why had she come to the beach today, for this? Sandy felt herself backing up when Ross picked Rose up in his arms and calmed her with whatever he was saying. Sandy didn’t hear what he said. She heard the seagulls, the waves, other beach dwellers laughing, and the rush in her head that told her to get out, get away.

Afraid? Maybe she was. This guy knew where she worked and was still being polite. He knew Dio. Caroline. He knew she was jealous of Caroline because of Dio and mad at her because of the job Sandy didn’t even want. Except for the pay. She did want the pay that came with it, far more than she’d make anywhere else.

But this, there was too much going on here she didn’t know, and she didn’t want to know.

Sandy turned from them while Rose was still distracted and jogged away as fast as she could through the dry sand, grabbing her shoes on the way, but not bothering to put them on until she reached the rocks leading to the parking area.

Chapter Two

How long had it been since Ross had gone to DanceOtica? He'd barely recognized the girl, Sandy, when he saw her at the beach. It took her "not that kind of dancer" comment to jar his memory. But then, she looked far different out of costume without stage makeup and doing ballet steps, obviously unprofessional ballet steps, but ballet all the same. She'd long ago become the reason for his occasional stops inside the club. He'd started going to scout talent. Since he pulled Dio and Caroline out, he hadn't a reason anymore, except for her.

Much of him wished they hadn't met, hadn't talked, that he hadn't seen how good she was with Rose, how vulnerable she looked in person, contrasting heavily with her tough girl act on stage.

Now, as he watched her dance, it hurt his gut. Ross wanted to pull her out, also. He didn't have a place for her in the theater. He just wanted her out, away from the leering men. He'd been one of them every other time, so he wasn't judging the guys. How could he? But now that he knew her, somewhat, things had changed.

She wasn't allowed dance lessons, didn't get to be Clara. Caroline had cheated her out of the job she'd worked three years to get after having to take a different kind of dance job, one that didn't require professional training. Why wouldn't she have hard feelings about that? She *took care of herself fine* and did whatever she wanted, so she said. Ross had a feeling that was a stretch.

The girl was a good dancer, good for the club. Good for pulling men back to the club when they wouldn't otherwise. Many would come no

matter who was up there, but Ross knew darn well many were only there for her.

As he was.

This time, though, it wasn't for himself. It was for his niece. Rose hadn't stopped talking about Sandy ever since she walked away on the beach three days before. And he hadn't stopped thinking about her.

Married. Briefly. A huge mistake. He was too curious for his own good. And Rose absolutely insisted Sandy had to come to the ballet.

So he would try again. Once more.

Making his way through the crowd and the noise, the calls for her to return, the unwillingness to accept she was the last dancer of the night, and the blaring music, Ross went back to the performers' door and greeted the bouncer guarding it, glad to see it was one of those who'd been there long term and not a new guy trying to prove himself.

"Aw, come on. Just turn around and walk away."

Ross shrugged, shoving his fingers in his front pockets. "Can't do it."

"That right? Who are you trying to steal from us now?" Morris pulled his bulk from where it rested against the wall to face him straight on. "I have orders not to let you in or even around this door, you know."

"Figured you did. But I'm not on business tonight."

"Yeah, right. Go on, man. Don't get me fired for not bouncing you outta here."

"Don't act like you think you could." Ross waited until Morris gave in with a grimace and moved aside just enough, then set a hand on his shoulder. "Good choice. And if you get fired, come and see me."

"Yeah, and I will, too."

Asking briefly after the guard's wife and kids, Ross gritted himself. It was far easier to deal with whatever bouncer he'd come across than it

would be to deal with the fiery stripper his niece had fallen in love with – yeah, that just sounded wrong, even to him – and he had to force himself to look confident. Nodding a hello to one of the girls who recognized him and veering around another who asked if he was looking for company, Ross easily found Sandy. In a lightweight robe, with the part of her costume she'd discarded during her act dropped onto her dressing table, the teased brown hair with light blonde highlights back to the length it was at the beach – obviously she wore extensions for work – she was downing a glass of wine in the back corner away from everyone else.

DanceOtica allowed their dancers only partial nudity; the bottoms never came off no matter how much begging by the audience, but many of the girls didn't go quite that far. Sandy was one who did not. Almost, with as revealing as her strappy bikini tops were, but never that far. Ross, unlike many of her fans, appreciated that she didn't. Her focus was on her dance.

He made his way over and she froze when she looked up and saw him. For a second. Then anger flashed across her face and she pulled a loose shirt over her head, covering the strappy bikini and her flat, muscular stomach.

“What are you doing here?”

“Rose sent me.”

“Sure she did. Didn't I tell you *no*? You need to leave before I get Morris.”

“Morris just let me in. We're good buddies. And I'll leave, but I wanted to give you this. For Rose. Don't say no, just think about it.” He handed her an envelope with her name written in bright pink, obviously from a child's hand. Then he walked away. He wouldn't push. He told

his niece not to push, so he figured he should follow the same rule.

“Wait.” At the door, she stopped him. “What’s going on with her?”

Ross felt the eyes on them. He wasn’t about to go into it there in front of too many ears. “Tell you what. I’m going to hang out with our pal Morris for a few minutes, and then I’m walking up the street for coffee. You’re welcome to join me, if you’d like. Up to you.”

Sandy heard the questions thrown at her from her coworkers, but she didn’t answer and didn’t acknowledge them. She dumped the rest of her wine, washed off her stage makeup, changed into something that wouldn’t catch attention on the street ... and with a deep breath, she opened the envelope. A ticket to the Nutcracker, box seat. A box seat. And a handwritten note. She skimmed it, forced the emotion not to show, put it in her bag, tossed the bag over her shoulder, and went out to him.

He gave her an almost grin. “So, coffee?”

“Sure. As long as you realize it’s only coffee.”

“Got it, and it’s all I was offering.”

She ignored Morris’s smirk and told Ross she’d meet him out front and down a block. She did not want to be seen walking out with him.

Charleston was at least decorated for the season and Sandy enjoyed the lights and lit wreaths and bells, even the slight chill in the air since the sun had fallen long ago. If she tried, she could imagine snowflakes, thick, fat snowflakes tumbling through the dark night and that wisp of white that came from warm breath meeting cold winter air.

Rose had never had a white Christmas. Maybe she’d never seen snow. It would be fun to take her...

“Far enough away?”

She jumped at his voice.

“Just me.” Ross again gave her that look, as though he was trying to read her mind or something.

“Has she ever seen snow?”

“Rose? Yeah, we had a few flurries a couple of years ago. I keep trying to take her up north to really see it, but her mom won’t have it.”

“Why?”

“Coffee first. This okay with you?” He nodded at the little hot dog place. “They have good local made coffee. Maybe you know that.”

“Haven’t been here since I hate hot dogs.”

“You’re missing out.”

Sandy wasn’t sure if he meant the hot dogs or the coffee or something held back with a glint in his eyes. Missing out was her life story. The guy had no idea.

He took the few steps to the door and held it for her, then let her choose where to sit. She chose a booth by the window so she could see the lights and agreed when he asked if he could order for them both. She wasn’t picky about her coffee. She’d drink it pretty much any way to Sunday and back.

“Have your tree up?”

She looked back at him while he pulled out of his jacket. “What?”

“Christmas tree. You have one yet?”

“No, I don’t bother just for me.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s just me.”

He crossed his arms on the table in front of him. Strong arms. Tanned. A moderate amount of hair, not too much or too little. “And ... you wouldn’t enjoy looking at it?”

“Yes, but...”

“Isn’t that a good enough reason?”

“Too much work when no one else will see it.”

He frowned. “You don’t have family here?”

“No. That’s why I’m here rather than in Connecticut. I left all of that for a reason.”

Ross leaned back when the server came with their coffee, thanked the girl, being just friendly enough, and tested its warmth before setting it back down. “You left because of your ex, you said.”

“Yes. So, Rose? What’s going on with her?”

“Rose.” His chest rose and fell. “Rose ... is the result of a very bad decision on the part of my sister. Long story short, she got bombed at a party she wasn’t supposed to go to when she was sixteen and we didn’t find her till three weeks later. Figured we wouldn’t by then. After we got her home, she got bombed regularly to try to block it out until she realized Rose was on her way. By then, the damage had been done. She was born very early and has delayed physical development, although thankfully her brain works fine and...” He sipped his coffee and waited while a couple walked past their table.

“And?”

“And a messed up heart. They said when she was born she wouldn’t make it to her fifth birthday, if that. She proved them wrong. Now it’s just ... hoping for the best. She’s on the transplant list, but odds aren’t good. Some have been on it for two years. She’s coming up on that already. Since she’s still functioning, she’s ... well, it’s not an emergency yet.” His jaw tightened and his face showed a fight to stay in control.

Sandra knew the look well, and the feeling. “That’s why she says she’ll disappear like Clara. Marie.”

“Right. It makes it less scary for her to imagine going to the ice castle and living like a queen.” Moisture made his eyes sparkle and he focused them on his coffee. “And it’s why she’ll never be an actual ballerina. She was taking lessons, but recently, she’s ... lost too much stamina. I had to pull her out. That’s what drew her to you. I’m sorry to bring you into it, but she was so taken by you and the way you were dancing...”

“But she knows Caroline. You know she’s an actual ballerina, right? Or she used to be.”

One side of his mouth curled up. “Yes, well, like you, Rose has a bit of a grudge against Caroline.”

“Why?”

“Because she wants to marry Dio when she’s old enough.”

Sandy couldn’t help but laugh.

“Don’t laugh if she ever tells you. She’ll be severely offended. She’s very serious. Some days she realizes she won’t likely ever get old enough, and other days she’s determined she will someday marry Dio.”

“She’s eight.”

“With the determination of six toddlers put together.” His chest rose and fell again, harder. “We just hope it’ll keep working for her.”

Silence filtered between them other than the normal late night diner sounds of shuffling dishes, a cooler humming, a low buzz of voices from the few patrons, and the occasional swish of tires of a car going too fast in front of the diner, its headlights catching the window and bouncing away.

Sandy sipped her coffee since it cooled enough. It had a deep, rich somewhat sweet taste although she hadn’t added anything. “This is good.”

“It is. Glad you like it.”

“Why is it sweet?”

“Brown sugar and molasses roasted into the beans. I stop by here all the time just for this.”

“I see why.” She took a bigger swallow, and studied the lights she could see out the window. “I’m sorry.”

“For?”

Sandy returned her gaze. “Your sister. Rose. It had to be horrific for your sister.”

“Yeah, especially since they never found who did it. No trace. They used an abandoned house. Tourists, we suspect.”

“I guess that’s why she doesn’t date or anything?”

“Won’t even leave the house other than the backyard and only that because I put a tall privacy fence around it. Also got her a mean-sounding dog that never leaves her side. He’s sweet as can be, but he sounds dangerous. I order her groceries and pick them up and I take Rose anywhere she needs to go. She won’t let anyone else in.”

“Since she was sixteen?”

“Since we lost our parents several years ago. She used to go out with them. That was before we found out about Rosie’s heart. That just crushed her. Regardless of circumstances, she loves that little girl to no end. She’s her whole life now.”

“Lost your parents how?”

“Dad died of a heart attack, all the stress of everything since he doted on his little girl and the shock of it all was too much. Mom moved to Florida after the second time her only daughter took pills to try to escape. Didn’t work since I found Hannah and took her in to have her stomach pumped, but Mom couldn’t deal with it all and walked away. No surprise. She never had much inner strength. Hannah has always

been too much like her, never went out with friends like most girls. The only way she could deal with being at that party was with alcohol. Trying hard to fit in. I kept telling her she didn't need to fit in, didn't need to go party like the others. She was fine as she was, an accomplished pianist, such a beautiful talent for it. She could easily have aced an audition for most anyone, but she couldn't handle the stress of the audition and would never agree to go."

He shrugged. "My guess is when we lose Rose, my dear sister will find a way to do it so I won't be able to stop her. She blames herself for Rosie's heart no matter what I say. I can't even say I'd blame her since, who would want to live that way? I've tried everything to convince her to get back to the piano, to start living again, to do *something*, but she walks away. Still, I keep trying, and I make sure Rose gets out and about as she should. She home schools. Hannah won't allow her in school. She keeps her locked up in that house other than when I take her out."

"She's lucky to have you. They both are, even if Hannah doesn't know it. It's sweet that you're trying so hard, Ross. Really, it is."

He shrugged. "Anyway, now you know the story, and if you want to back away from us, I completely understand." Their server returned to refill their coffee, but he held a hand over his. "Thank you, but I should be going soon. I'm already out past my bedtime."

Sandy accepted more with thanks since the coffee was incredible and it never kept her awake.

"So I guess your huge mistake doesn't seem all that bad now, right?" He watched her over the coffee mug as he tilted it up high to get to the bottom.

"Well, hers was more someone else's doing. Mine was my own doing. I married a guy who was using me to get into the family, to get to my

parents. Which worked well for him, not so much for me.”

“Sounds like a jerky thing to do, but...”

“Meanwhile, he had two other girlfriends with five kids between them, all his. I had no clue. All that time. I dated him for years. My brothers knew, though, before we got married. They found it pretty funny.”

“You’re kidding.”

“As I was leaving town, my lawyer was serving divorce papers and mailing photos of our wedding and of each of his families to the other girlfriend. I haven’t seen any of them since. We were married all of four months.”

“That sucks, but good for you. I can just imagine his face when he realized what you’d done.”

“I’d waited for him. I’d known him for years, and I waited for him. I felt stupid. I still feel stupid.”

“You’re not.”

“Of course I am. How would I not know?”

“Some people are incredibly good liars and actors. I should know. I work with plenty of them, actors that is, although there isn’t always much difference. A good actor is a good actor.”

True, of course. Still, it did nothing to make her feel less stupid. “I’m going to have pie. Can you stay long enough to join me? You don’t have to, of course.” Sandy looked up at their server when she came over and asked what kind of pie they had. Apple. Banana Cream. Peach... “Peach. Please. A la mode.”

“Of course.” The woman grinned and turned to Ross. “You too?”

He caught Sandy’s eyes a moment, pondering. “If I stay and have pie with you, will you meet us Sunday?”

“A bribe?”

“If you wish.”

She grinned at him. For some reason, she couldn't help but grin at him. “Fine. You win. Now I know where Rose gets it.”

“You could be right. I'll take apple, though.”

“A la mode?”

“Of course. Thank you.”

Chapter Three

At just after three in the morning, Ross tried to conceal another yawn and apologized. “I think I’ll have to call it a night.” He hated to do it, as much as he’d enjoyed the conversation, but he still had to drive home and be up for work in four hours.

“Sorry I kept you so long.” Sandy held the back of her hand over her mouth to cover the yawn he’d passed to her.

“I’m not. I’ve enjoyed it. It’s been a long time since I’ve had a normal conversation with an intelligent woman. Usually it’s wrapped around the theater, and as much as I enjoy work, it’s nice to step away. I’d nearly forgotten how that felt.”

“You don’t date? Or you date actresses?”

He grinned. “I don’t mingle work with pleasure. Actresses are safe around me.”

“I didn’t mean...” She blushed.

“I’m teasing. We theater men get a bad rep, and sometimes it’s deserved, but not always. I haven’t had time to date, really, between work and Rosie and taking care of my sister. So.” He stood. “Can I walk you back to your car? I’m guessing it’s behind DanceOtica.”

“I don’t have a car. I walk. But thank you.”

“You live close?”

“About four blocks, or five from here. Not far.” She stood and tried to pick up the check.

“On me.” He took it from her.

“Thank you, but the pie was my idea, so I should at least...” She opened her little bag that hung around her shoulders and sat at her hip.

“Least I can do for barging in on your life the way we have, and for having to listen to all of that.”

“No, it’s no problem. I enjoyed the conversation, too. Besides, you already gave me a theater ticket. I think that more than covers you. It’s too much, and you don’t have to. If you want it back...”

He stepped closer, his head dipping toward hers. “You already agreed to come.”

The man smelled incredible, like ... ocean air and trees and musk. His tired eyes held more of a blue cast than they had at the beach. His gaze was friendly, not leering, not suggestive. Only friendly. Welcoming. Sandy felt herself wanting to pull in closer. “If you’re sure.”

“Positive. And let me give you a ride home.”

“Oh. No. You don’t...”

“Sandy, it’s three o’clock in the morning. I can’t stand the thought of you walking five blocks at this hour. And it’s cold by now. I’ll only take you to your door. You have my word.” He set a hand on his chest.

“I’m not worried about ... my safety. Only...”

“Then let me drive you home. Please. So I don’t have to worry about your safety until I see you on Sunday.”

Luckily, she gave in and they walked together back to DanceOtica where his car was parked. The dark streets were mainly deserted and she wrapped her arms around her stomach at a chilly breeze coming in from the Atlantic. Ross wished he had something to let her borrow, but he’d only worn a thin shirt over his undershirt, and taking it off would be far too inappropriate.

A small group of men and a couple of women were behind the club, near his car, obviously having a high time. They stopped laughing to

stare when they realized they'd been caught. Sandy hesitated, but he took her hand to set on his arm and threw his other up in greeting. "Just getting the car. Don't let us bother you."

"Come on over and join the party." The guy eyeing Sandy got elbowed by the girl at his side and shrugged his hands, the joint misting its smoke up into the girl's face.

"Thanks. Another time maybe." Jangling his keys, Ross kept an eye on them as he opened the passenger door to get Sandy inside, locked it with the button on the door so it wouldn't beep, and walked around to his door, unlocking it again last second.

She took a deep breath when he pulled out and onto the street. "You might want to park out on the road instead next time, I mean, if you come again. There's always someone out there."

"They were only hoping we weren't undercovers or that we wouldn't report them. No big deal."

Sandy didn't look convinced, and she was silent other than directing him a few blocks away until he pulled in front of a tall apartment building with crumbling front porch, a slanted hand rail about to fall over, and a so-called security door that wouldn't be hard to get through without a key. Ross was more wary of whoever else living in the building than he'd been the group in the parking lot.

She looked over at him when he turned the engine off. "I'm at the door. No need to..."

"You're not at your door. You're out on the street. I said I'd get you to your door." He got out and walked around while she was still sitting in his car and opened the door. Still, she sat. "I'm not going to try to go farther than your door, Sandy. As I said."

With a glance, she got out and walked silently up to the building,

something held firmly in her hand he couldn't see. Her key, he supposed, and something more. For defense, maybe? He hoped it was.

"Well." He stopped one step below the landing to make it clear he wasn't trying to get in. "Thank you for the conversation. We'll see you Sunday. Would you like a ride? I can pick you up."

"No. Thank you."

"Are you sure? It's a long walk from here."

"I'll call Harry."

"Harry?"

"He drives a taxi. Independent and not terribly expensive. Very trustworthy. Caroline actually suggested him to any of us girls."

"Yes, I know Harry. Glad you're covered. Still, my offer stands. Here." He pulled a card out of his wallet. "My number if you change your mind. Leave a message. I never answer if I don't recognize the number, but I'll call you back." He looked up at her building. "And... I will walk you up to your door if you want. Just..."

"Thanks. I'm fine." She showed him a little black container in her hand, alongside a heavy metal pen-shaped thing with a pointed end. "Pepper spray and a defense stick. Tools of the trade."

He nodded. "So, I have to admit I know what DanceOtica pays. Why do you live here when I know you could do better than this?"

"I'm saving my money so I can get out of here and away from DanceOtica soon. Maybe very soon. I'm looking at heading farther inland, away from hurricanes, away from anyone who knows me. But I want a decent bank account first, because I'm not sure what I'll find out there."

"Away." Ross felt a heaviness he usually refused to allow. Soon. Soon, he would lose Rose. The signs were increasing. And he would lose

her mother. And Sandy wasn't staying. She was moving away. Soon. Figures the first person he'd opened up to in years would be about to leave. Just the way it always went for him. Everyone left.

"Not before Sunday."

He met her eyes. She was teasing. He tried to grin. "Well, that's good. Rose would be sad."

"I don't want that."

"No. Neither do I."

"Are you going to be okay?" Sandy stepped closer, down to the step he was on. "If she..."

"No. I will be a mess. I will be devastated. She's like my own daughter and..." He grabbed a deep breath. "But eventually, I'll be okay again. She's made me promise to find the right girl and be happy. So I guess I'll have to do that."

Sandy saw the moisture in his eyes and saw him try to fight it. She did not want to end the evening that way. "You know, I would feel better not walking up four flights by myself at three-thirty in the morning. I mean, if you want. Of course, then I'll have to watch out my window." She pointed up at her apartment. "And be sure you get back in your car okay."

"I'd love to walk you up." He motioned for her to go ahead.

They were silent all the way up the stairs, and at her door, Sandy stopped, playing with her keys. "Thank you. For... well, everything."

"You're welcome, Sandy. I look forward to Sunday more than I did before."

"Yeah? You don't enjoy the Nutcracker?"

"Of course I do, and seeing Rose so happy is not to be missed, but ...

it'll be nice to have a date of sorts other than my eight-year-old niece. You could at least act like my date of sorts if you wanted so I don't have to hear again about how pathetic I am."

She smiled. He was too awfully cute while being so humble. "I guess you do look pathetic if dating a stripper would be a step up."

"A dancer." He turned serious and touched her face. "And I can guarantee you no one I work with has a leg to stand on about being judgmental because of your job. Okay? DanceOtica is entertainment, an act, like every show at the theater. All an act. We all have our personal demons and stories we hide. All of us. Don't worry so much."

Sandy rose to her toes and leaned in to kiss his cheek. "Thank you for that. You're so very sweet, and Rose is lucky to have you." Stepping back and turning from him, she unlocked her door. Nearly inside, she felt his fingers on her hand. When she stopped, he curled her fingers inside his, gently, easily, so she could still free herself from him if she wanted.

With a curious look back, she saw he hadn't moved closer.

His gaze was gentle, sweet. "Will you at least be here through Christmas?"

"Oh. Yes. It won't be that soon. Spring, probably. Before the influx of tourists."

"Good. Well, see you Sunday."

She felt herself nod and tried to pick up her feet enough to go on into her apartment, but he stood there, her fingers gently in his, the fatigue showing on his face, his eyes soft and so very tender. And despite her better sense, Sandy moved in toward him, holding his gaze.

Slowly, he lowered his face. Her heart thumped in her chest as she told herself it was too fast, he was too dangerous with his charm and his

pretty smile and his gentlemanly demeanor and his sweet words. And his niece who was dying. His sister who would leave him all alone.

She knew how alone felt.

She knew that so very well.

And he was afraid of it.

His lips touched hers, barely touching her, only his lips and her fingers still in his, still gentle and unassuming.

Sandy pressed in to make it more real. A real, sweet, gentle, nice kiss. Only his lips and his fingers in hers, no longer loosely held, but firm, possessive. Her doing, not his. She reveled in the connection, his body so close and yet leaving space. Respecting her space. Respecting her.

Releasing him, although she didn't much want to release him, Sandy thought he might be the first guy she'd kissed who didn't thrust his tongue inside her mouth on their first kiss. Her head dipped so her forehead nearly touched his shoulder, she tried to catch her breath. "I don't, um... I didn't intend to..."

He kissed the side of her head. "Me either. It's ... late and we're both tired, so how about we leave this here and..."

"Yeah." Sandy stepped back, not meeting his eyes. He was blaming fatigue, and maybe he was right. Being too tired affected the senses, played with emotions. He was right. It was only that. "Call me when you get in, okay? So I know you did? Just so I'll sleep better."

"You'll have to give me your number."

"Oh." Pulling her little flip phone from her purse, Sandy punched in the number from the card he gave her. As she expected, the phone he wore hooked to his belt rang.

He pushed something to make it stop. "Got it. Good night, Sandy. I hope you can sleep in."

“I can. Wish you could.”

He shrugged. “I don’t mind.” Quickly, he gave her another soft kiss and touched her eyes, then made his way down the stairs.

Closing the door, she went to her window and watched until he had his car door open and gave her a wave, then got in and headed home.

Only fatigue. Sunday, they’d feel differently and wonder what business they thought they ever had kissing like that. At her door. At nearly four a.m.

Chapter Four

Somehow, through a series of texts, Ross convinced Sandy to let him pick her up before the show. She was already nervous. She had no idea what people wore to the ballet and she didn't have much in the way of traditional dress clothes. Settling on a soft maxi skirt in various shades of red topped by a thin hi-low white sweater that came just below her waist in front and dipped down to cover her backside from showing how clingy the skirt was, she added the necklace she'd made out of red and green glass beads she'd special ordered from Czechoslovakia. They were odd-shaped beads, not round or oval, and she did them in three layers, connected here and there, with small round satiny-white glass beads as fillers. One of her nicer creations, she thought. At least she could look a little bit Christmassy for the production, for Rose.

She jumped at the buzzer and hit the intercom button to be sure it was him. Her heart beat faster at his voice. "Hey, I'll be down in a minute."

"Can I come up?"

"Oh. Um, yes, but you don't need to."

"Will you buzz me in?"

"Of course." She held it long enough he'd have time to grab the door and then panicked at the thought of him coming up, coming in, to her apartment. She never let men into her apartment, or even to know where she lived. She could meet him at her door ready to go, purse in hand and... And that would be rude after he came all the way over to get her and walked up four flights.

She jumped again at the knock. "Pull yourself together. You're going

for Rose. And that'll be the end of it." Closing her eyes and taking a deep breath, Sandy moved to the door. When she saw him, all of her calming techniques went down the drain. He was in black pants and white shirt with a narrow red and green striped tie hanging almost to his belt. In his left ear, a red gem sparkled. His hair was pulled back at his nape, making him look a bit like an old-time nobleman, at least the way they were pictured in movies. "Wow."

He grinned. "A bit different than my beach bum look?"

"You look great. You did on the beach, too, though. I mean..." She looked down at herself mainly as a way to try again for a bit of calm. "I don't dress up much. I hope this is good enough."

"Perfect. You're gorgeous. These are for you, since I did ask if you'd come off as my date today, for the sake of my coworkers, you know." His eyes glistened, teasing, as he held out a bouquet of an exotic looking flowers in white and dark red, mixed with sprigs of holly. They were tied to a little nutcracker figurine with a red and green plaid ribbon, as though he was holding the bouquet.

"Ross. It's... You didn't need to..."

He leaned in and kissed the side of her head. "I'm glad you agreed to come with me."

"What are these?" She touched the soft conical petals.

"Calla lilies. They're Rosie's favorite, so her idea. They have enough water for a day or two. After that, you may have to transplant them."

"Transplant?" The bottom of the bouquet was inside the nutcracker's drum.

"It's a plant, not cut flowers. Rosie hates getting cut flowers because they die so fast. She insisted I find something growing instead. Yes, I am fully wrapped around her finger." He gave her a shrug with a rolled-eye

grin. “Ready to go? If not, we have a few minutes. I’m early.”

“They’re beautiful, and I happen to agree with her. Let me just put these down and grab my handbag.” Setting it on her coffee table, she turned to find him perusing her small book case.

“You didn’t leave Rose in the car, right?”

“No. We’re going back to my place real quick to get her. I wanted to pick you up without my little audience. That sounded bad, didn’t it? Suggestive. I didn’t mean it that way.”

He was so cute. Humble cute. Unassuming cute. “You’re fine.”

“Am I? Because I’m feeling rather flustered about now. I expected, after a few days away from you and it not being in the ides of morning, so to speak, that this might feel different. But ... it doesn’t, so much. We should probably head out now. Got everything?”

Was he blushing? Sandy studied him and he looked farther away. Definitely blushing. He opened the door, not looking at her, set a hand gently on her back as she passed him to go through, waited as she locked the deadbolt, and offered his arm on the way down the stairs.

Settled in his car, something familiar came over her, as though she’d been there. Not déjà vu, but more than that, as though she was in the right place at the right time and the universe was finally spinning in her favor. Stupid thought, Sandy. You only want it to be...

He got in next to her and tilted his head. “What were you just thinking?”

She couldn’t possibly answer him. How did she explain how comfortable she was sitting in his car at his side, even knowing she would soon see her Dio after four years of missing him at work?

“Sandy? Are you nervous?”

“Actually, no. And it’s strange that I’m not. I’m not particularly

looking forward to having to socialize with Caroline, but I'm excited about seeing the ballet and seeing Rose again, and oddly, I'm ... actually not nervous about..."

"Me?"

She caught his eyes. "Yeah."

"Well, Dio will be there, dressed up and all, so you and Rose likely won't even remember that I'm around. Guess I'll entertain Caroline, which is fine, too. I have nothing against her."

"Real funny."

He grinned and reached over to touch her face. "It does seem like we've known each other for some time, doesn't it? And that was corny, but still... There is the fact that I've watched you on stage quite often, so on my part, I guess I have some reason..."

"Quite often?"

"I stopped in a lot for a while, until I decided I was being a stupid obsessive fan and made myself stay clear. Then I had to run into you on the beach as though someone was telling me I was stupid for trying to stay away, or..."

"You're a fan of my show." Her stomach turned and Sandy nearly jumped back out of his car.

"No." He lowered his hand to take hers. "Sandy, no. It wasn't your show. It was you. Something about you pulled at me. I didn't know why. It didn't happen with any of the other girls. They're just dancers. Nothing. But... Look, I know how it sounds, but I'm serious. It's you."

"Please don't be lying to me. If it's the act, fine, I'll still go and act like your date and talk to your niece so she'll be happy and all, but be honest."

Ross pulled her hand to his lips to kiss her fingers, those blue, green,

brown eyes peering so directly into hers. “Give me a chance to prove it to you.”

“How do you intend to do that?”

“No idea. Might take some time to figure that out. But we better go pick Rose up before she gets in a tizzy about the time.”

Expecting a big house with large southern porch complete with white columns, Sandy was puzzled and relieved when he pulled up to a rather small, rather unadorned little ranch house with no porch and a rather plain privacy fence wrapping around the back from each side. The huge oak in the front yard streamed with Spanish moss was the big attraction of the place.

“Rose loves that tree. On the other side, it’s formed into a seat of sorts close enough to the ground she can climb up and sit in it to read. She does that a lot. We call it Rose’s tree.” Getting out, he walked around to open her door while she was still gawking at the tree and studying the little house. It had been painted dark green at some point but needed to be redone by now. A vine with yellow flowers grew up a slanted trellis and up onto the gutter spout.

“That was Rose’s doing, also. She found it when we were out walking a couple of years ago and decided to bring a few seeds home and plant them. I didn’t expect it to do anything and I have no idea what it is, but I have an awful time trying to keep the thing trimmed up off the house.”

“Carolina Jasmine.” Sandy walked over to it and touched the petals. “You should let her know it’s poisonous if eaten, not that she would at this age.”

“But not to touch.” He took her side.

“No.”

“You’re ... a plant expert or..?”

“No. This is my favorite plant in the world.”

“A poisonous plant.”

She met his amused gaze. “I don’t plan to eat it. Hummingbirds love it. It’s fine to touch. But you should chase bees away from it if you see them. It’s toxic to them, too.”

“Chase bees away? That’s not going to happen.”

“You’re afraid of bees? They don’t bother you unless you threaten them.”

“I’m deathly allergic.”

“Oh.”

“Which makes me even less apt to be out here trimming the thing. Anyway, I’m surprised Rose hasn’t descended on you yet. Come on in.” Unlocking the door, he called inside that he was back and Rose came running, followed by a dog barking and growling.

A bulldog mix, she thought. Mostly white, it had brown patches, including around one eye, reminding her of that dog on *Little Rascals*, except noisier. When it came closer, she stepped behind Ross.

“*Knock* it off, Rusty.” Ross pointed to the back of the house and it quieted and ran to the back of the house. “You don’t like dogs?”

“No, I do, but not when they don’t like me.”

Rose hugged her tight. “He won’t hurt you. He’s just loud and gruff, like Uncle Ross sometimes.”

“Thank you.” Ross rolled his eyes at the child.

“What is he?”

“Bulldog Boxer mix. Loud, which is effective, along with his size, but sweet. Hannah’s dog. He does take his job seriously.”

“You look beautiful. I *love* this.” Rose fingered the necklace.

“Thank you. So do you.” Rose was in a blue velvet dress with white

lace trim and a big red and green plaid sash around her waist, with a ribbon in her hair to match. The blue brought out the blue in her eyes, which, like Ross's, were only partly blue mixed with green, without the brown. It also made her look less pale than the red had the other day, or maybe she was less pale.

Now that the dog wasn't scaring her, Sandy noted a strong peppermint smell in the house, likely from a candle or two or three. The place was neat and bright, all whites and lavenders, filled with Christmas decorations. A tall skinny tree was in one corner, adorned with a ton of lights and many child-made ornaments, including a red and green construction paper chain like she used to make as a child.

In the other corner of the room, a tall skinny woman came from a doorway, the dog at her side, her arms crossed in front of her stomach. Her head was tilted forward, making it necessary to look up out the top of her eyes.

"Hannah, this is Sandy." Ross set a hand on Sandy's back, but didn't move them toward the woman. "Sand-snowman maker, extraordinaire."

"He's exaggerating." Sandy gave him a quick grin. "It's nice to meet you. Rose is a wonderful child, very persuasive."

The woman nodded but didn't answer, and Ross told his niece to get her coat and shoes on and give her mom a hug. "Sure you won't go with us?" He asked his sister, but she shook her head. "Okay. We'll be about three hours. My phone's on vibrate if you need me." Moving over to her, he kissed her head and said something quietly in her ear.

Outside with Rose in the car, he paused before he opened Sandy's door. "Don't be offended. She doesn't talk to anyone she doesn't know."

"I'm not, at all. I do wish I could give her a hug or something,

though.”

“You’re a huggy person?” His head tilted curiously.

“No. I’m not, actually. I’m a ‘don’t touch me if you don’t know me ridiculously well’ person. Still, I just ... I understand not trusting people. I guess I’d like her to know that some of us are okay.”

With a sad grin, he kissed her head. “I keep trying. Another woman might be able to do a better job. And no, I am not asking or suggesting you should. Rose is likely going to give you enough run for your money.”

Chapter Five

Whatever nerves Sandy might have had about seeing Dio and Caroline again didn't show even an ounce. Ross knew Dio wasn't more thrilled about seeing Sandy than Sandy was about seeing Caroline, but of course he was gracious. Caroline was more so, doing all she could to make Sandy welcome. Of course Ross told her why Sandy had resented her at work, which made her feel bad, so it was largely an apologetic gesture at this point.

He'd reserved a box for the occasion and Dio brought his little ones, as Ross said he should. They were well behaved for three-year-olds, no surprise at all, considering their parents. Rose split her attention between Sandy and Dio and the boys and was nearly walking on air before the ballet even started. Sandy asked Caroline about her foot and at least looked genuinely glad her several operations had been successful, that she was back to dancing enough for the theater. She glanced at Dio's scar now and then, the one running diagonally across his face that used to be very dark from the childhood burn but was fading with Caroline's care and a good dermatologist.

Ross considered being jealous, since she was still apparently attracted to the guy. Who could blame her? Dio was built like the guy who played Aqua man, and still graceful. He was as tall as his friend, but barely over half his girth. Okay, maybe more than that, but hardly as much to look at, size-wise. Ross didn't think he was too bad looking, though. She had said *wow* when she opened her door to him. He wasn't sure any other woman had reacted anywhere near that well.

Not that she was paying any attention to anyone or anything during

the ballet. She was transfixed. During the dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy, her eyes watered and he reached over to take her hand, leaning in to her ear. “Are you all right?”

She graced him with a quick smile and nod and put her attention back on the dance, but she didn’t pull her hand away. Of course Caroline noticed in between talking quietly to her kids. So did Rose. The precocious girl gave him a huge smile and sat back in her chair like she’d just swallowed the proverbial canary whole.

He had to admit, sitting there with Sandy at his side hanging onto his hand, he felt a bit like that himself.

“Oh, Ross, thank you so much. Really. Even if Rose made you do it, this was wonderful, and I’m so very grateful you couldn’t say no to her.” Outside the theater, Sandy grasped both of his hands, oblivious to the others, even to Rose yammering and jumping around, releasing her excitement.

“Well, I’ll tell you a bit of a secret.” He leaned in close. “I was glad she asked you, since I didn’t have the nerve.”

Her eyes, soft round light green eyes, caught his. “That’s ... incredibly flattering. Everything considered.”

“Everything considered?”

She shrugged. “You’re the catch between the two of us, you know. I’m still wondering...”

“I’d say you’re wrong about that.” Releasing one of her hands, he touched her face, cradling the side of it against his palm with his fingers slipping just over her shoulder-length brown hair. At the club, it was longer. Extensions, apparently. For the act. He liked it better this way. “I’m flattered you would think so.” Even with everyone around, the

audience drifting out, his friends still right there, and some coworkers floating around, Ross set a kiss on her lips, only for a moment. Warmth flooded his system. “I have to say by now it was absolutely not only early morning fatigue. Will you have dinner with me?”

A deep throat clearing at his side preceded a nudge against his arm. “Rose was just asking to come out to the farm. Why don’t we do a cookout? Maybe you can convince Hannah to come. It would be good for her.”

“Why don’t *you* convince Hannah to come?” Ross rolled his eyes. “The scariest looking guy in the Charleston area and my sister chooses him as the one person to trust, other than me.”

“He doesn’t look scary.” Sandy blushed and averted her gaze from Dio, but she didn’t back down. “Hannah can see what the rest of us do, at least we women. He feels safe. He *was* DanceOtica’s white knight in black, after all.” Maybe she shouldn’t have said it, but Dio was being avoidant with her, as he always had at the club, and it irked her.

Caroline smiled and hooked her arm around her husband’s. “See? Isn’t that what I’ve always said? Come on. We’ll head over to Ross’s with them and convince Hannah to come.”

All in all, Sandy felt the day went well. Dio’s farm was next to as wonderful as the ballet, well, next to as wonderful as Ross who was next to as wonderful as the ballet. So far, she was still keeping a bit of a wall in front of Ross. She hadn’t been anyone’s fool since that jerk she married, and she had no intention of being so again. Still, she trusted Dio. All the times she’d flirted with him at work, she wished now she could take back, but he did feel safe. And he was. He never took her up on it, never took advantage. He’d watched over all of the girls at

DanceOtica, the strip club where he used to do his swordsman routine, especially the new girls. Until Caroline came and pulled him away.

To be fair, she didn't exactly pull him away. They combined their routine and stayed for a few months after they got together. Still, Sandy expected he would still be there if Ms. Classical Ballerina hadn't come along.

He was doing well, though, and obviously happy with her, wonderful with his beautiful sweet children who were well-mannered except when they were tussling with each other.

Hannah spoke to him now and then, not to Caroline, or to her. Mostly, she kept her arms in front of her stomach and her head down, eyes up to watch Rose as she played with the boys and talked to Dio, claiming him as much as she could, and sat next to Sandy to eat. The girl didn't talk to her mom, or even notice her that Sandy could tell.

Ross pulled into his driveway and looked back to see Rose's head resting on Sandy's shoulder. "Long day for her."

Hannah turned as though scared, staring at her daughter.

"She's fine, only tired as a child would be." Ross assured his sister and got out to gather Rose. "We're home, baby. Come here." Picking her up, he stroked her head with a grin at Sandy, then went around to prod Hannah out of the car. It was dark, and he'd kept telling Rose they needed to go before it got dark. Rose procrastinated in any way she could.

And Hannah apparently didn't want to get out. She was ducked into herself.

"It's fine, sis. I'm right here. You can't stay in the car all night." When she wouldn't budge, Ross told Rose she'd have to walk. But she was groggy, so Sandy took her, distracting the girl as well as possible

while her mom threw a fit about being outside in the dark.

“Look. The porch light is on. Hold onto my arm. It’s only a few steps up there, and we’ll be inside.” His chest rose and fell when she pulled back into the car. “Don’t make me force you. Okay? I’m too tired, and we have company.”

Hannah swiveled her head toward Sandy, took her brother’s arm, gripping him like she’d be washed away by the night air otherwise, and hurried to the door, nearly panicking until he got it unlocked and they were all inside. Her dog at her side, she darted toward the back of the house.

Ross sighed, took Rose, and said he’d be right back.

Sandy nearly called Harry to come pick her up and just get her out of there. Instead, she paced while studying the little house, but it felt like she was being nosy, so she went back out the door to sit on the front step. She liked the dark. The air was cool by now, but that was fine, too.

Watching cars go past, their headlights blinking along the street, interrupted by road signs and trash cans that should have been put away by now and children’s toys too big to take in for the night, a strong urge to run came over her. This wasn’t going to work. Ross was a family guy. He’d want his own, eventually. His own children.

He would want his own children.

With a sigh, she got up and considered walking home, but it was too far and she was in heeled sandals rather than the ballet flats she wore to and from work in order to rest and stretch her feet after wearing her four inch heels on stage. He was a fan of her show. Not what she wanted. After dating patrons now and then, and after dating Cowboy, the club’s biggest male draw since Dio left, which had been another mistake, Sandy wanted someone unconnected to her work.

She'd have to wait until she moved and got away from it entirely.

“Hey. Sorry it took so long.”

Turning to his voice, she nearly changed her mind. That gorgeous lion's mane hair glowed under his porch light. The gorgeous tall and lean build was still emphasized by his dress shirt and black pants, without the tie ever since they got to Dio's farm. The masculine handsome face that wasn't gorgeous but was far less plain than she'd thought at first looking at her so kindly...

“Sandy?” He took the two steps down to meet her. “Everything okay?”

“Yes. Thank you again. I'm going to give Harry a call to pick me up so you don't have to leave them to drop me off. I honestly enjoyed the day, and I'll always be grateful...”

“Whoa. Why the rush? Is it Hannah? She was only shaken tonight because it was dark and she was out. She'll be fine with you...”

“No. It's not. I just think we should leave it at this. And I need to go. I have a new routine to work out tomorrow for tomorrow night, so...”

“I'll take you home.”

“No. You don't need to.”

He slid a hand around her head. “Today was my invitation. I picked you up and I'll get you home. Just let me get my keys.”

“But, Rose...”

“Her mom's there with her. It's fine. She takes care of her fine, despite how it looked tonight. Don't call anyone. I'll be back in half a minute.”

It was more than half a minute, but Sandy didn't say as much when he opened the car door and closed it behind her. The drive to her place was quiet, and again, he insisted on walking her up.

At the door, she hesitated. "Thank you, Ross."

"You've said that already, two or three times already." His grin teased. His fingers touched hers. "Can I come in for just a minute?"

"I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"Okay, then. I'll do this here in the hallway." Claiming her lips, he gently pulled her body up against his.

Sandy gave into him, allowing herself to enjoy the feel of the hard, masculine body and the feeling inside of her, the warmth, the connection, the longing. She would gladly let him stay if there was any point to it, other than the obvious. She'd done that often enough, the temporary flings just to have a man for a while. Ross was not the right man to do it with.

Releasing her lips, he met her eyes. "Thank you for coming today."

"You said that already."

"Right. Well. I'll go and let you settle in." Caressing the small of her back with his thumb, he set a light kiss on her lips and slowly moved back. "Maybe I'll stop by the club tomorrow night to see your new routine."

"No." She stepped back with a shake of her head. "Don't."

"Why?"

"Because... Just don't come."

His head tilted. "Have you ... advanced your show?"

"Advanced?"

"I mean, you're not... You never used to do topless like some do."

"No. That's not... I still don't."

"I'm glad. And I've seen your show already. Why..?"

"Please, just don't. Don't come, Ross. Not on my work nights. I'm off Tuesday and Thursday, so go then and..."

“That would defeat the purpose of seeing you.”

“I don’t want you there.”

“Why?”

How could she answer that? How would he understand it would change things? She knew him now. He felt like he could be a friend, but not if he came to leer while she stripped for strangers.

“Okay.” He shrugged and backed away. “For now, I’ll agree. Have a good day tomorrow. Good luck with your new routine.”

“You’re insulted.”

“No. Confused. Your signals are ridiculously mixed, you realize.”

“Signals? I’m not pushing anything. Your niece invited me to the ballet, so I went, but...”

“For her? Only? Because I get the feeling you might be enjoying my company, as well.”

“I am. That’s why I don’t want you to come.”

“Okay, then. I’m going to go. Maybe let me know you get home okay after work? Just a text, a couple of words.”

“Why?”

His chest rose and fell and he came back to her, gripping her around the waist with one hand and around the head with the other, and he kissed her, slowly, deeply, until she felt herself melt into his arms.

She did not want him to go. She badly wanted him to stay.

“Because I care about you, Sandy.” A whisper in her ear that made her eyes clench. “You’re the first thing that has made me feel that maybe there’s something out there other than the constant worry over Rose and work that has lost its value the more I worry over Rose and the more I realize Hannah is not going to get better as I kept hoping, that she’ll always be something I have to take care of. You make me feel alive

again in between the weight and the despair and the guilt about the weight I feel. You're ... a spark I haven't had in far too many years."

With another soft kiss, he slid his hands to hers. "I realize I've known you longer than you've known me, and it may sound ridiculously impertinent, but there it is. You matter to me."

"Ross." Her head shook of its own accord, and Sandy swallowed hard. "You can't do this. You don't know me. Seeing me dance doesn't mean you know me, or knew me. You don't."

"Don't I?" He shrugged. "I know you had a huge crush on Dio, maybe more than a crush. Knew it before we met, actually. I know you go out with your fans at times, short term. I know you dated Cowboy for a good, long time, which worried the hell out of me because of everything Dio said about him..."

"It's not true."

"What's not true? You did date him."

"I did. But the rumors around the club weren't true. He's a decent guy. The cocky thing at work is an act. He's actually very insecure, and he was good to me. At the club, he's acting. All of it. He's never hurt anyone, would never hurt a woman. He's a good guy, only far too insecure to let anyone know."

"Honestly?"

"I would never be dishonest with you."

"Why did you break up?"

"He got too clingy. If we weren't at work, he was calling, or at my doorstep. He constantly gave me the third degree about who I was talking to if he saw me talk to anyone else. Like I said, far too insecure. I couldn't deal with it."

"But ... he never..."

“He was good to me otherwise.”

His chest rose and fell. “I’m glad to know.”

“I wouldn’t date anyone who wasn’t. So, obviously you don’t know me as well as you think.”

“I know you have a kind heart, you’re good with kids, you’re tough enough to deal with being around a couple you didn’t want to see and to even get along them well, including the woman you’re jealous of.” He grinned, teasing. “I know you’re hard working and elegant and accepting...”

“Ross. Stop there, okay?”

“Just trying to prove a point.”

“Do you want your own kids? When you find the right girl? You’ll want your own.”

“Yeah. Definitely.”

She nodded. “Then I’m not the right girl for you. I’m sorry. You need to stop this before it goes further. You don’t know as much as you think and you’re assuming too much too fast, and yes, I enjoy your company, yes, I’m attracted to you, but it’s not going to work. So let’s say good night now and keep our nice memories of the weekend...”

“You don’t want kids?”

“I...” She wasn’t going that far. It didn’t matter. “I’m not the girl for you. If you want to be friends, for Rose’s sake, I’m okay with that, but don’t come see me work, and don’t start making plans or anything.”

“Sandy...”

“I’m not having kids, Ross.”

“I don’t get it. You’re great with Rose. You were even great with Dio’s triplets.”

“I’ve known you all of five days. This shouldn’t even have to come

up yet, but I don't want you to think something's happening here when it isn't."

"No? It sure feels like it is."

"I'm sorry. You should go." The way he looked at her nearly changed her mind, but she couldn't give him what he was looking for, and he was already pushing things too fast.

Forcing herself to back away, she unlocked her door, stepped inside, and looked back to where his gaze had dropped to the floor. "There is life out there for you, Ross. Go find it. You deserve to have your own life. Really, you do. Take care, okay?" Closing the door, she stood against it trying to gather herself. It could have good. Sandy knew it could have been very good.

Chapter Six

“Can you ask Sandy to come to the beach with us?”

Ross made himself take a deep breath before he answered his niece. “She doesn’t want to see me. And no, I didn’t do anything. Okay? How about we just go check on your snowman and have a nice day, the two of us?”

“But I need you to have someone else.”

“I have you. Go tell your mom we’re leaving...”

“But no, you *have* to have someone else. A girlfriend.”

“Someday I will...”

“No. *Now.*”

His stomach turned and he stopped looking for their beach gear to study her. “Rose, do you feel all right?”

“If I say no, will you call Sandy?”

“Huh uh. Don’t play that game with me.” Tugging her hand to have her sit next to him on the couch, he pressed fingers against her neck to feel her heartbeat. It felt okay. “Do you feel okay?”

“I want Sandy to come to the beach. Please. Call her. Tell her I want to see her. *Please.*”

“Maybe we should take you in for a quick check first.”

“No. I want to go to the beach while I can.”

His gut clenched. He’d thought she looked more pale this morning, but he brushed it off as being inside more often lately since the temperatures had dropped. “Baby, don’t you give up on me. They’ll find you a donor. We’ll fix this...”

“No, they won’t. It’s okay. I’m not afraid to turn into Marie and go

dance with my castle friends. Don't be sad. I want you to be happy, Uncle Ross. You have to call Sandy."

"She doesn't want to see me, but there are other fish in the sea. Don't worry about me. Tell me how you feel and be honest."

With a big sigh, she shrugged. "Not so good."

"Okay, baby. We're going in for a checkup. Don't argue." Ignoring her pout, he went to tell Hannah he was taking Rose in. "Coming?"

Her eyes wide, she shook her head.

"Come on, Hannah. This is *your* daughter. She needs you. You'll be with me. You're fine. Just come with us."

Shooting up out of the chair in her bedroom where she'd been staring out the window at the backyard bird feeder, Hannah strode to the living room, kissed Rose on the head, told her she loved her, then went out the back door, slamming it on the way.

Cursing in his head, Ross managed to keep it only in his head while he grabbed Rose's purple jacket, her favorite, helped her into her shoes, and took her to the car. "If they say everything's okay, we'll go straight to the beach from there. Okay?"

Instead of her usual smile and nod, she frowned and slumped into the seat. Not at all a good sign.

Chapter Seven

She'd told him not to come to her show.

For more than a week, he'd listened, he'd left her alone, but there he was, not only in the audience watching her new routine to *The Ballad of Mona Lisa* from her favorite band, Panic! at the Disco, but standing far too close. The routine wasn't meant for him. She'd taken a page from Caroline's time at DanceOtica and mixed in the ballet moves she'd taught herself from videos. It wasn't meant for Ross. He would think it was jealousy, competition, proving herself, something. It wasn't.

The Nutcracker inspired her. Rose inspired her. If you couldn't have it the way you wanted it, you made it the next best thing and pretended it was what you wanted.

He wasn't supposed to see it.

Sandy did her best to ignore him, to focus on the men hooting and hollering, holding ones and fives up to the stage to get her to move closer. Fine. He didn't want to listen: she would convince him he should. Not only did she move closer, she flirted heavily, shaking her shoulders, knowing their eyes were fixed firmly on her breasts that were not quiet naked but close enough. She'd stopped wearing her trademark orange a couple of years ago, other than on occasion, so tonight it was a tan bikini covered with black lace held up with leather straps that crossed in front of her chest. Her tan bikini bottoms were hard to see underneath the genie-like black lace pants draping to her ankles.

Expecting it would turn him off, or at least annoy him enough to leave, she glanced back over at him. He was moving closer, watching the men in front. Fine. If he wanted to play that way, she could play that

way. Backing up from the edge enough to do two pique turns without kicking the men leaning in, Sandy did a deep backbend and eyed him a moment with her head upside-down, then rose, did two more turns, and retreated to mid stage to finish her routine.

She did not look back. Heading to the dressing room, Sandy cursed aloud through the hall, paying no attention to her coworkers as they stared.

“At least there’s not a little one to hear you talk like a sailor this time.”

Nearly at the dressing room door, she turned to face him. “Like a sailor? You mean like almost everyone these days? You included, so she says.”

He dipped his head while scratching his scalp. “Okay. Look, I just...”

“I told you not to come here.”

“And I wouldn’t have if you’d answered my calls.”

“You didn’t leave a message. My message says to leave a message because I almost never answer. Figured it wasn’t important...”

“I’m not up for the attitude tonight, okay? I just came to tell you, since I didn’t want to leave it over a message, that Rose is in the hospital. She’s been there for four days now and would like you to visit if you can spare a few minutes. Your call. I delivered the message as she asked. See you around.”

“Wait.” Sandy hurried over to grab his arm. “Why?”

“Why do you think? She wasn’t feeling well, so I took her for what I hoped was a quick checkup. And they wouldn’t let her leave. Four days ago.” He swallowed hard and his chest rose and fell.

“Ross...”

“We’re still hopeful. They have her on meds to try to... whatever they

think it'll do until and in case they get a donor, which by now... And you know, it's hard for me to even hope for that since it would have to be another child and that's... How can I hope for that? She can't even hope for it."

"Let me change and I'll go with you. Wait here, okay?"

He nodded, his shoulders slumped, and he backed up to lean against the wall.

"Two minutes." She touched his face but he didn't look at her. Cursing herself, only in her head this time, for not answering his calls, Sandy threw her street clothes on, washed her face, grabbed her jacket, and found him in the same place in the same position. "Ready. I can follow you."

"Follow?"

"I bought a car. Used. Cheap. But something that will take me out to Folly Beach without calling Harry."

"Thought you were saving all of your money for moving."

"I'll need a vehicle to move, when I get around to moving."

With another nod, he straightened enough to walk, followed to her car, and accepted a ride back to his. As she'd suggested, he had not parked behind the club, but a block or so away.

Rose was still asleep when he got back to her room, so he gave in when Sandy took his hand and led him out to the hallway. Being very early morning, the hospital was quiet with dimmed lights and muffled voices. They tried to stop Sandy from going into her room after visiting hours, but he lied and said she was her aunt. He didn't expect the nurse believed him, but she let it go. They all knew. He'd been there round the clock. They knew she may never go home.

“Where’s her mom?”

He snickered at Sandy’s question. “Home, of course. She won’t come. Haven’t seen her in two days. I did go home long enough to shower two days ago, and I told her again she should come with me, that it could be her last chance to see her daughter. She won’t do it. Fine. I’m out of patience. I get that she’s scared, but this is her *daughter*, for hells sake. I just can’t... I’m out of patience with her.”

“I can’t blame you. Isn’t Rose hurt? I mean...”

“Rose...” His chest rose hard and fell and he shoved a hand through his hair. “Rose is the most accepting and most forgiving person you could ever know. She says it’s okay. She doesn’t want her mom to be more uncomfortable or more sad.”

“Does she know what happened?”

“Basics, not details. She’s not old enough for details. She only knows her mom is afraid of people and accepts it for what it is.”

“Kids do that. We could learn a thing or two from them.”

He shot a glance at her. “Thought you didn’t like kids.”

“I never said that.”

“You said...”

“I said I’m not having any. Not the same thing. I like them just fine, and Rose ... Rose is incredible and...”

“And she’s dying.” Ross pressed his palms against his eyes.

“There’s always hope, Ross.”

“Right.” Dropping his hands, he shook his head. “And we’ll have snow on Christmas here in Charleston for what may be her last Christmas. I should have ignored her mother last year and driven her up to the north like she wanted.”

“Still can.”

“They won’t even let her out of here. You don’t get it, Sandy. Stop trying to act like miracles actually happen, if you don’t mind...”

“They do.”

“Yeah? Name one. A real one. That you’ve seen yourself?”

“You. Rose.” She gave him a soft shrug and claimed his fingers.

“There’s two.”

“No miracle in that. It’s biology.”

“Really? Because to me, running into you at exactly the moment in my life I needed ... something, was pretty miraculous. And Rose... I can’t even tell you...” At his raised eyebrows, she backed away. “To me, she is, and even if you have her only a short time, you have to know that what she’s given you and what she’s leaving you is still a miracle. Because my guess is she’s something you very much needed, too. I bought a tree, Ross. For the first time in a lot of years, I have a small tree in my apartment, decorated, and yes, it makes me happy to look at it. Much of that is because of Rose, and you, and I won’t let myself not have a tree again.”

Through the little rectangular security window leading into the bland white hospital room, Sandy saw Rose turn her head toward the chair Ross had been using. “She’s awake.”

“Hey, Rosie. Look who’s here.” He took his niece’s hand and nodded to Sandy to come over.

A sleepy smile welcomed her, their new friend. If she didn’t want to be more than his friend, he supposed that was okay and better than nothing. Maybe one of those miracles she believed in would come along eventually and she’d change her mind.

“We’re going to Folly Beach when they let me out. Will you come

with us?” Her voice was soft, sleepy.

“I would love to go with you.” Sandy ran fingers along her forehead. “I’m sorry I haven’t been here.”

“It’s okay. Uncle Ross is here. You should tell him to go home and sleep. He won’t listen to me.”

“I’m fine...”

“She’s right.” Sandy caught his eyes. “You should. How about I stay tonight, or this morning, so you can get some rest? And maybe another shower.”

Rose chuckled. “She’s saying you smell, Uncle Ross. You better listen. Girls don’t like their boys to smell.”

He wasn’t hardly Sandy’s boy, but it was nice to see the child laugh. “You just got off work.”

“And I’ll be awake much of the night, anyway, as always. Go sleep, Ross. Rose and I are going to have some girl time. It’s fine. Really. I’ll call you if you need to come back for anything. You know, if she gets tired of me or finds a cute nurse you need to check out or something.”

Rose chuckled again. He tried to argue, but he got outvoted. A long, hot shower and his own bed sounded pretty amazing, so he kissed her little head, set a hand on Sandy’s shoulder with a thank you nod, and made himself leave.

Lingering outside her window, Ross grinned through moist eyes at their faces, so obviously happy in each others’ company, and felt a heavy weight sink into his soul. Why now? Why did Rose find a mother-figure who acted like she wanted to be her mother just before she was...

Fading. Too fast. Why couldn’t she have had a couple of years with Sandy first? Sandy would do those mom things with her, wouldn’t she? Although since she said she didn’t want children, maybe she wouldn’t.

Not *didn't want*. Wasn't having. Different.

Why? For the first time, he pulled out of himself long enough to wonder why she wasn't. Her job? Did she not want to have to tell her kids what she did for a living, even after she left it? Her family? She hadn't had a great family experience, from what he knew. That did often scare people away from wanting their own. Could be that's what it was. In which case, maybe she'd change her mind in time.

Did he want to invest the emotional garbage that came with a relationship long enough to find out if she would?

Maybe. If she was interested.

Chapter Eight

Sandy felt herself drift off in the big arm chair close to Rose's bed. The girl had been asleep for nearly an hour after talking for so long, about her uncle and how she worried he'd be too alone and too sad after she went to live in her nutcracker castle, about how her mom would join her there and she wouldn't be afraid anymore because nothing bad happened in her castle and they would play and find snow and build a snowman and name him Ross.

Good thing Sandy had learned long ago how to hold her emotions back. Otherwise, she would have broken down in front of the child and she couldn't do that. Ross was having a hard enough time. It showed all over him. Sandy supposed that was why Rose wanted him to leave for a while, because she could see it.

It was supposed to snow all the next week up in Connecticut. They should take her, just put her in the car and drive up where she could make a snowman, at least once, out of real snow. What would it hurt? If her mother wouldn't go, then let her stay home alone. It was her choice. Rose should come first.

Since Rose was asleep, Sandy let herself relax into slumber. Startled awake by her phone, she grabbed it quick before it woke the girl.

"Is she asleep?"

It took her a second to recognize Ross's voice. "Um. Yeah." Checking the clock on the wall, an old-fashioned white and black clock with big hands and big numbers, she realized she'd slept for a couple of hours, nearly three.

"Good. Meet me outside, okay? I'm here."

Getting up to walk away from the bed, Sandy stepped just outside the room. “What’s wrong?”

“Please. Just come down.”

“I’ll be right there.” With a glance in to be sure she was still asleep, Sandy let the nurses at the desk know Rose would be alone for a few minutes or so and hurried down the hall, waited impatiently for the elevator, and smoothed her hair with her fingers to be sure it wasn’t sticking up anywhere.

He was right outside the main doors, pacing. When he saw her, he took her hand and led her farther away, where there weren’t people walking past.

“What’s wrong, Ross?” He looked worse than when he left, not better, although he’d changed clothes.

“Hannah.” He swallowed hard.

A shiver ran all the way through her spine and down her legs. “What happened?”

“She left a note. Said a child should never die before a parent and she couldn’t deal with it. Said it’s fine, don’t worry, she’ll be happier and she’ll be there waiting to meet Rosie.” With a shake of his head and watering eyes, he shoved a hand through his hair. “I ignored Rusty whining at me, which he doesn’t do, and went straight to bed. Just crashed. Set my phone for two hours of sleep. I can live on two hours. I’ve done it a lot. Nearly didn’t bother to let her know I was heading back after I woke up and showered, but guilt set in, and that dog was whining again. So I went to check on her.”

“Ross. No.”

“How do I tell Rosie? Or do I bother? Maybe I won’t. I mean, if they don’t let her go home... Or if they do, I can take her up north, to the

snow, just say her mom won't go and... What do I do with this? I expected it. I did. But the other way around. Why do I get to do this, too? Why should I have to tell her *this*?"

Sandy wrapped him in her arms, holding tight while his body shuddered with sobs, quiet sobs. She said nothing, simply let him release what he could. Shamefully, her biggest thought was that now they could take Rose north for Christmas, to find snow. There was no reason they couldn't. If the hospital would let her go. But what good would it do for her to stay in that sterile, quiet room? It was too quiet...

Too quiet. She needed music. Activity. Something else to think about. "I think we should."

Sniffing loudly, Ross released her and accepted the tissue she pulled from her handbag. He avoided her gaze, embarrassed, maybe. "Should what?"

"Take her north to find snow. I know a good place..."

"Christmas is in a few days. I'm not sure she'll be up to traveling by then. Even if she is, I have to handle arrangements. I can't leave until I do." He shoved a hand back through his hair and treaded over to a garbage can to toss the tissue.

"Well, maybe we should get her out of here, get her back where she can unwind and revive while you handle what's needed, and then take her. Maybe for New Year's?"

"Right. Take her home to where her mother should be?"

"She could come to my place."

"No offense, Sandy, but I don't want her in that part of town. Don't want you there, either, especially, but I can't tell you what to do." He paced and sniffed again. "Yes, she needs out of here. But..."

"You'll have to tell her. But, to maybe help you with that, she was

just talking about her mom being in her castle with her and not being scared anymore and playing with her there...”

His head fell back, his eyes to the cloudy sky. His chest rose and fell hard.

“Should I not have told you?”

He shrugged his hands and kept pacing. The man looked so ridiculously lost and so down, Sandy nearly cried for him. But she couldn’t. She needed to be the strong one now. She had to help him take care of things.

Not exactly what she expected when accepting a theater invitation. Heavy strings, these were. And yet, she was glad to feel useful, needed. In a fully different way than Cowboy needed her, so he’d said. His was ... using, really, and she’d known it at the time, although she told herself otherwise. Sometimes the line between being useful and being used was awfully hard to determine.

“Let me tell her.”

He turned back to stare, a question he didn’t seem to want to ask in his red eyes.

“Here.” She pulled a generic brand of eye redness remover from her handbag, explained that she often used it to combat the look of fatigue after work, and offered to help. He didn’t need help, dropping it first into one eye, then the other, without even blinking twenty times first in anticipation the way she always did.

“Thanks. I did shower, by the way. So I wouldn’t smell, at least.”

“Hadn’t noticed that you did if you did.”

“Sandy, I can’t ask you to...”

“It’s not as hard for me. I didn’t really know Hannah. To be honest, I think Rose will be better off not having to deal with that on top of ...

everything else. I know that sounds brutal, but that's just me. I'm brutally honest and direct, more than I should be. Anyway, it'll be easier..."

"Whatever you think of Hannah, she's ... she was Rose's mom and Rose loves her, so..."

"I understand that. Trust me. I love my mother, too, even if she was a worthless mother who let my brothers run over top of me and harass me non-stop. Whatever. I understand. I won't be brutal with Rose. I think I can do it better than you can. Okay?"

"I need to be there..."

"Of course." With the heavy risk of allowing her feelings for him overwhelm her, Sandy moved up to him and ran fingertips along the side of his face, his strong lion face.

Catching her hand, he kissed her fingers. "Stick around with me the next few days. Please. I know you have to work, but..."

"I'll take this week off. Yes. I'll be here."

"You'll be okay with that?"

She caught herself shrugging it off. "As I said, I've been putting money back. And I'm not so much in a hurry to move these days." Sandy couldn't help hugging him again.

His chest expanded against hers. "So much for your miracles. This is going to crush her, and she's already..."

"I don't think it will."

Backing up, his shoulders straightened. "What makes you think it wouldn't?"

"Because..." Sandy faltered. It wasn't her place. And maybe she didn't understand Rose as well as she thought she might.

"Because why? The child just lost her mother."

“Yeah, kind of. I’m not sure she ever really had one. And I’m not being critical. I mean ... I understand. And ... I mean that sometimes it’s actually a relief to finally know you will never be able to count on someone after years of hoping maybe someday you could. The hope that never happens is pretty hard to take. It’s better to let it go. Easier. I’m not trying to be rude. I’m not downplaying Hannah’s importance. I’m just... I have ... experience with ... not really having a mom who’s technically around. I think it could be easier on her, after the initial shock, of course.”

He stared, his eyes watering again.

“Anyway, we should go check on her. Right?”

Ross caught her hand and gently brought her in close, stroking fingers along her face. “I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s fine. It sounded callous, I’m sure...”

“Sandy, I mean I’m sorry that your mother let you down. Mine did, too. I get it. I understand what you mean, but I still think much of Rose did expect her mom to come through for her, and now...”

“Now she has to grieve and move on.”

“Move on.” His eyes rolled. “Do you hear yourself? What makes you think she’ll have time to move on?”

“Because I think she will. Don’t give up on her.”

Chapter Nine

Ross alternated between being glad they released her and wishing he'd had a couple of days to take care of things first. He couldn't take her back to the house yet. Mercifully, Hannah used pills and not something messy. Still, she'd died in the house, in her room, and Ross couldn't face being there just yet.

He gave in to stay at Sandy's place, figuring if he was there with them, it wouldn't worry him as much. First, he'd taken them to dinner at Rose's favorite barbecue joint and let her enjoy being out of the hospital and happy before he could make himself tell her about her mom. She and Sandy chattered easily across from him in between messily enjoying a stack of ribs. Ross nearly expected Sandy to try to eat the things with fork and knife, but, to his own enjoyment, she grabbed them with her hands and licked her fingers like any good BBQ aficionado. From there, they stopped at White Point Garden, the park at the bottom tip of Charleston, and wandered until Rose started to wilt.

Sitting her on a bench, Ross wrapped the blanket he'd brought from the car around her shoulders and stroked wisps of red hair from her precious pale face. Sandy took her other side. He figured it was as good a time as any. "Sweetie, there's something I have to tell you. And I know it's going to be hard, but you're so strong and I'm right here for you..."

"It's about my mom, isn't it?"

He nearly couldn't keep going. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I know everything else already. I know my heart is running low on batteries." She grinned at the joke she'd made up long ago. "I know this is the last year I might be able to see Christmas snow, but they

don't want me to go that far, so I guess I won't. So it has to be about my mom if it's something else bad."

Ross held her in and kissed the small head. "Yes. Your mom..."

"She said she would play with me someday when we don't have to worry about my heart and she doesn't have to worry about people anymore. At the palace of the Nutcracker Prince. She said she could find her prince there and let you find your princess here, like you should."

Rose took Sandy's hand. "Are you going to be my Uncle Ross's princess? He needs one."

Sandy gave her a grin and caught his eyes for just a moment, amused. "I'm glad you think I could be, but maybe there's another girl more suited to be his princess."

"No, there's not. You're a dancer. He likes dancers. You like barbecue and you know how to eat it right. He likes that, too."

"Is that why you wanted to take me there?"

Rose nodded. "I wanted to see. And you look at the old buildings when we drive past, and Rainbow Row. You like Rainbow Row like Uncle Ross does. And..."

"Rose. Okay. Thank you, but I still don't need you to play matchmaker for me."

"Yes, you do. I might run out of time and you won't find your princess and be happy ever after like you need to be. You're the only one left who can and I want you to have happy ever after." Tears fell. So unusual for Rose, who never cried.

He swallowed hard, trying to control his own, and held her close against his chest. Her ear lay against where his heart beat, as she did so often. He so often told her he would give her his heart if he could. She always argued she wouldn't take it.

“Rosie. Don’t worry about me.”

“But I have to, because no one else does, and you need someone who does. Please. You have to let yourself find your princess who will worry about you.”

“I think maybe I have.” Maybe he shouldn’t have said it, but he met Sandy’s eyes and she didn’t pull hers away. “I’ll just have to convince her of that, right?”

Rose looked from him to Sandy and back. And she smiled while she brushed her tears. “Yes.”

“Okay, sweetie. I’ll do my best. But listen a minute. Your mom... She...” His throat caught and Sandy reached across to grasp his hand.

“She’s waiting for you now where it doesn’t hurt anymore, where she doesn’t hurt anymore.” Waiting to get his okay to continue, Sandy gave Rose a kiss on the forehead. “She wants you to stay here with us just as long as you can, to keep using that strength to stay with us, and she’s watching over you. But someday, she’ll be there for you the way you’ve always wanted, with nothing between. Okay? Do you understand?”

“Yes. She doesn’t hurt anymore.”

“Right.”

Her little head nodded. “I’m glad. It’s not fun to hurt. It’s okay.”

Ross beckoned her to look at him. When she did, she cried and clung to him. After she calmed and held him softer, without tears, only with occasional sniffles, he stroked her head. “How about we stay at Sandy’s for a couple of days? Would you like that?”

She nodded. “Can we go now?”

“Of course. Want to piggy back to the car?”

“No. I want to walk.”

Sandy saw how wary Ross was about taking the girl into her neighborhood, and into her building, but when she unlocked the door, she made them wait while she went in to turn the tree lights on, as well as the lights around the window that faced the road. Switching the living room light back off again, she opened the door and saw Rose's big smile and heard her gasp as she headed toward the tree.

"Nice." Ross rubbed his arm against hers as he closed the door.

"It's small, but I made it bright." And sparkly, with lots of tinsel.

"Sandy, thank you." Away from where Rose would hear, his voice low, he cupped her head and brought her face to his. "I can't imagine having done that without you there."

"You're welcome. After she's asleep, I have a nice bottle of wine I've been saving, if you're interested."

"I'm ... very interested." Lowering his face, slowly, he met her lips.

She couldn't help but give in to it. Such a perfect kiss, in the near dark with the lights of the tree glowing and the soft happy voice of a sweet child...

Pulling back, she shook her head, set a hand on his chest, and turned the lights back on. "Let me make up the daybed in the second room. Make yourselves at home. I'll be right back." First, she dead-bolted and latched the door, as she always did when she was in the apartment.

Shaking out the sheets that hadn't been used in some time, she moved stuff off the daybed to the little desk and chair where she spent her hobby time, stuffing the many containers of beads up into the old cabinet next to it.

When she returned, he had two ornaments made of glass beads in an intricate snowflake pattern in his hand. "Where on earth did you find these?"

“I made them. A hobby.”

“Wow, Sandy. They’re beautiful.”

“Thank you. Someday I might do something with them.”

“You have more than those on your tree?”

“Lots. It’s what I do to unwind. Look.” She found a glass disc toward the top and showed Rose the sand snowman with Morris Island lighthouse in the background. “I paint a bit, too, but only simple things. On glass. I like glass.”

“It’s *my snowman*.”

“Yes. And it’s yours, if you want it.”

“Really?”

“Of course.”

Giving Sandy a strong hug, Rose showed Ross that it even had his sunglasses.

“So, what time is bedtime? Can we watch a movie first?” Knowing Ross would pretty much give the girl anything she wanted tonight, Sandy wasn’t surprised he agreed. Neither had seen her current favorite, so although she’d watched it maybe twenty times already, including three times in the theater, she put in *The Greatest Showman* and watched Rose’s face through it nearly as much as she watched the movie.

Chapter Ten

Ross would have preferred to sit next to Sandy, with Rose on either side, but the girl sat between them on the couch and was nearly asleep well before it ended. He carried her into the extra room, wrapped her under the blankets, and kissed her forehead. “Sleep well, baby.” Sitting beside her long enough to be sure she was going to sleep and doing okay, he stroked fingers gently through her gorgeous red curly hair with a deep sigh. A strong girl, his Rose. He only hoped she would be strong enough to wait out the list.

Standing, he paused when he noticed Sandy at the door, her eyes shimmering in the nightlight, her dancer’s poise so noticeable and yet so casual, her dancer’s frame perfectly shaped. When he came up in front of her, she took his hand and led him back to the couch. Two half-filled wine glasses were on the table.

Grateful, he picked them both up, handed her one, and waited.

“What should we toast to? I can’t think of anything.”

“New friendships.”

“Good as anything.” He touched his glass to hers and sat heavily with a deep breath allowing his body to slump.

“Are you okay?” She sat close, but not quite touching him. “Stupid question, I guess, but...”

“The last thing I said to her was rude. To Hannah. I was ... so frustrated that she wouldn’t go see Rose, and I lost it. I told her she was selfish, that she could come out of it if she wanted to, that it would be a good example for Rose if she would force herself to live like a normal person again.” He shoved a hand through his hair. “I shouldn’t have. I

feel like it's my fault. Through everything I've done for Rose, I turn around and ... take her mother away..."

"No, you didn't. Ross." She set a hand on his back, his lower back.

"You're right. She should have put Rose first."

"You don't understand..."

"No. I know. No one could who hasn't been there, but a lot of us go through a lot of hell and we still deal with it, we still put others first. So she could have. She chose not to. And I'm sorry. I'm sorry for you, for Rose. I'm also sorry for Hannah that she couldn't, for whatever reason. But it's not your fault. It's not."

"The worst part is that Rose knows her mother gave up on her. She knows. How do I keep her from not giving up now?"

"Oh, Ross, it's not her mom she looks to. It's you. *You* can't give up. You have to convince her not to. She's a smart kid. She knows her mom gave up a long time ago. It's you that matters most."

He was silent for some time, sipping his wine and watching the lights flicker on her tree. She'd done flickering white lights around the inside with steady multi-colored lights around the outside so there was movement without the lights being off. He hated flashing lights because of that, but this ... this was nice, kicking back in her apartment with dim light that was never out entirely and near silence. Being told he wasn't to blame, that he was the one who mattered.

Taking in a lung full of air, he let it out slowly and leaned back against the couch. "I could get used to this."

"The wine? It's local..."

"No. That too, maybe." He brushed fingers back through the hair lining her face, behind her ear. "You. Just ... sitting with you."

"Me, too. It's nice." Getting up, she went to the kitchen area and

grabbed a box of crackers and a plastic container of cheese hunks of white and yellow, set it on the coffee table, and then strolled across the room to turn on a lamp. Returning, she switched off the overhead light before joining him. “Easier to see the tree lights this way. Is it okay?”

“Of course.” He had to wonder if she was trying to set a mood, and although it was not good timing on his part, with as exhausted as he was, mentally, Ross didn’t think he’d mind, either.

They talked for over an hour as she asked about his family life, growing up, how he got into the theater, all while avoiding talk of her own family. Then, returning the snacks they’d finished with to the kitchen, she came back and curled in next to him, turned toward him with her leg bent and partly over his. An intimate move for someone who said she wanted to be his friend.

And it was too much of a turn on. “Sandy, if you don’t want this to go further, you might consider not ... um...”

“I didn’t say I didn’t.”

“You’ve said it in a hundred ways. And yet...” He looked down at her leg and let his fingers roam over her knee, down her calf.

“I do, but you have to understand I can’t take this as far as I’m afraid you’re thinking. Of course not tonight. Tonight, and for the next little while until you’re ... more settled again, I’m just here for you, as your friend. After that, yes, we can, but I can’t be...”

“My happy ever after princess?”

She let out a quick snicker. “Yeah. That.”

“Why can’t you be? Like the movie said, it’s up to us.”

“Oh, yes, but...”

He leaned in to kiss her, letting the taste of the wine on his tongue mesh with the taste of wine on hers. She was such a luscious mix of ... of

everything he wanted. Like Rose said, the mesh of beautiful dancer and messy eater. Somewhat willing, but not pushy. Down to earth and yet elevated in a way he couldn't yet touch. Everything. "Tell me why you can't be."

"Hm. Not tonight. It's not the right time."

"I kind of think it is, while we're talking about it. While we're pretty much sitting on the edge, here, a little too close to falling off." His own words startled him back to recent events. "Maybe not an expression I should use tonight." Backing up, Ross took a good swallow of wine and set it on the table. "Okay. I get it. I just... I just think you could so easily be my happy ever after, or as close to that as I can get, you know. I'm not going to be easy to deal with when ... if Rose doesn't make it long enough to get a transplant that might, possibly, actually work. They don't always, you know. Sometimes they have to go right back on the list to try again. If that happens, if she doesn't make it. I won't be easy to deal with, and I know it, and it's really fine if you have to back away from me for a while."

"No way would I back away from you, if that happens. Are you kidding? What kind of friend would I be?" She sat up to rub a hand over his back.

"The kind everyone else has been." He shrugged. "Except Dio and Caroline. They'll be there."

Staring a moment, she set her glass down and snuggled closer, pulling his eyes to hers with hands alongside his head. "Anyone else wasn't an actual friend. I would really like to be your friend. More than anything. I mean, down the road, if you want more than that, I might be willing, but either way, I would really like to be your friend. You can count on me. I'll be here. Hard doesn't bother me, Ross. I've seen plenty of it..."

“Tell me. About your family.”

“No, not tonight. Tonight is about you and Rose. The rest will wait.”

He sighed, a heavy, deep sigh that brought the exhaustion deep within out to the surface.

“You should sleep. I’ll go on to my room so you can. Let me put the sheets on the couch. I will give you my room, though, if you’d rather...”

Catching her when she picked up the sheet she’d set over the arm earlier, he took it from her hands, pulled her in against him, and kissed her. A long kiss. She clenched the shirt on his back and pressed in against him.

Finally, he made himself release her and had to give himself a minute to catch his breath. “I accept.”

“Um. What?”

“Your offer of friendship. Real friendship.”

“Oh. Good.”

“And I’ll be here for you, too, when you need.”

“Okay.”

“Sandy...” How could he say what he wanted, without sounding pushy, without getting punched in the jaw, or... He just...

“Come lie beside me.” Her soft gaze beckoned to him. “I can feel you don’t want to be alone.”

“Um, if you’re...”

“Just to sleep, Ross. That’s what you need right now.”

“I can think of something else I need.”

“Maybe.” She brushed the hair along his face with gentle fingertips. “Later.” Taking his hand, she led him to a small room, smaller than the guest room, with a double bed pushed up against one wall, underneath a small window with an aged-yellowed pull-down blind with a short string

attached to a plastic circle. No curtains. An old tall and thin dresser was on the opposite wall beside a painted white wood slat door that had to be a closet. A small side table was beside the head of the bed. On it was a messy stack of magazines, dance magazines, or at least the one on top was a dance magazine, a small digital alarm clock, and a small lamp without a shade.

There were no pictures on the walls. Nothing. Even the bedding was plain, a peach color that looked faded. Ross had to wonder if it had been orange, as her work outfits always used to be.

“I know it’s boring. No one comes in here, so it doesn’t usually matter. I’ll take the side by the wall. It’s only a double, so...”

“So I’ll have to lie close. Doesn’t bother me. But if you’d rather have your space, I’ll stay on the couch.”

Her look said she knew he meant more than the bed space. “I wouldn’t have offered if I didn’t mean it. Just to sleep. For now.”

“Of course. I’ll be right back.” Returning to the living room, he picked up the small bag of things he’d stopped by the house to grab for himself and for Rose and went to the small bathroom, which was as plain as her bedroom, with a peach floral shower curtain and matching soap dish and toothbrush holder the only color beyond the beige sink top and badly-stained brown pine cabinets. He changed quickly into an old pair of sweats and soft, loose tee, brushed his teeth, splashed water over his face, and took a long, deep breath before returning.

She’d changed, also. In orange pajama pants that were too big for her and a large off-the-shoulder white tee over an orange tank top, she was brushing her hair. Setting the brush on the dresser, Sandy pulled the sheets back, crawled over to the far side, and held it up as an invitation.

“Maybe I should sleep on the couch.”

Her eyebrows raised. “Afraid of me?”

“Afraid of me. You ... are a little too incredible and I’ve ... had a horrendous last few days topped by an even worse one today...”

“Lie down, Ross.”

Giving in, he tried to stay as far toward his edge as possible, but her warmth crept over and soon she crept over against him. She gave him a soft hug, a softer kiss, and settled close, turned toward him, with a hand on his arm. “You’re going to fall out of bed like that. Relax, okay? Come this way more. It’s fine. I won’t bite.”

“Not sure I’d mind if you did.” He covered a yawn and moved an inch or so toward her, staying on his back, as usual, glad she kept his arm. “Night, Sandy. Thank you.”

She gave him a soft squeeze. “You’re welcome. It’s nice having you here, Ross, so it’s mutual. Switch the lamp off before you go to sleep.”

Chapter Eleven

“How about a carriage ride today?” Ross noticed the girl barely ate breakfast, but he couldn’t make himself mention it.

Her eyes lit up. “Yes! And Sandy has to come, too.”

He looked up at Sandy when she made her way back to the little kitchen table she was clearing. “She can if she wants, but Dio and Caroline will be there to ride with you. I have things I have to take care of...”

“Dio’s horses pulls the carriages!” Rose was focused on Sandy. “My favorite is Cassatt. She’s little like me and she eats sugar from my hand but she won’t take it from anyone else. Just me and Dio can give her sugar from our hand. Will it be Cassatt pulling?” She was back to him.

“I didn’t ask, but Dio knows how you love her, so she might be. Anyway, are you okay with going with Dio if I’m not there? Only for a little while...”

“Yes, it’s okay. Sandy can come with me, right?”

Not what he wanted. He wanted Sandy to go with him, if she would, to take care of arrangements. But he’d never interfere if Rose wanted her today. “She can, if she wants.” He caught her eyes. “Do you like horses?”

“I’ve never met one.”

He chuckled, despite the pit in his stomach. “Okay, would you like to meet Dio’s Cassatt, or whichever one it is?”

“Dio owns the horses for the Charleston carriages?”

“For one company, and by now, he owns the company, also. It changed hands a couple of years ago and he didn’t like how the horses

were being treated, so he threatened to pull them all. When he did, the new owner said he was free to buy the place since it fell to him and he didn't want it. So he bought it to be sure the horses were treated well."

"Nice. I've always loved watching them go by."

"Ever been on one?"

"No."

"Well, it might be about time, if you're interested."

With Rose pulling at her, she agreed, but she looked not real sure about agreeing.

Taking over cleanup duties, since Rose dragged Sandy off to get ready, to help put her hair up, and whatever other girl stuff she mentioned, Ross felt the weight of the pit grow heavier. Funeral arrangements, but without a funeral. There was no point in one. Hannah had been too isolated for too many years. Anyone who came would only be there for him, and he didn't want to deal with it. Still, it felt wrong not to have a service.

He forced a smile for his niece ... he had to do legal paperwork now, also, to claim her as his, more than he had already. Hannah had given him legal rights so he could do what was needed years ago, after their mother walked away, to Florida.

Ross had sent a registered letter, overnight mail, so she would know by now. The woman didn't even have a telephone. He gave her his number in case she wanted it, but there was nothing more he could say. He'd told her everything in the letter, and last minute, he added a drawing Rose did of the Nutcracker ballet. She'd done many of them, so giving up one was okay. In case her grandmother might have any interest. Rose used to draw pictures for her, and had written to her, but she never answered, so Rose quit bothering. He said she liked being left

alone and that she was a silly woman to give up time with such a sweet young lady, but Rose was smart. She knew it as a rebuff.

Ross knew his mother couldn't deal with the reminder of where Rose came from, of the horrible three weeks her daughter was missing, of the thought of what happened. She'd wanted Hannah to give the girl up. Since Hannah refused, she distanced herself from them both.

Her loss. Sandy was right. Even if he only had her for a short time, Ross would never for the life of him give up the time with Rose that he could have.

And he hated having to be away from her today to take care of arrangements. The dog. He'd have to do something with Hannah's dog, also, other than stopping to feed him and let him outside to do his business. He'd suggest Sandy taking him, for protection, but after the way Sandy backed away from the barking animal, he doubted that would happen.

Brushing aside the weighted pit in his gut, he gave her a smile when the girls came back out with hair done and somewhat matching shirts. "Okay, sweetie. Let's get going. I have an appointment soon."

Sandy had to wonder about Rose not saying one word about her mother, or about where Ross was going, anything. She seemed ... fine. Not even covering fine, but fine. She was, of course, excited about the horses, and about Dio. Still, it was odd.

She ran to Dio when they pulled up to the carriage, veering first to the horse with a pat on its nose, then gave Dio a big hug and said hello to Caroline.

"Where are the kids?" Ross set a hand on Sandy's back to encourage her to join them.

Caroline greeted them both with a concerned smile. “With their sitter. We thought it would be nice to spend time with Rose without the chaos of the terror triplets. How are you doing, Ross?”

“Okay. Um, Rose asked if Sandy could go with her. If it’s okay...”

“Of course, but...” Caroline gave Sandy a grin, but focused on him. “Of course. If you’d rather, I can come with you. I’m sure Rose will be fine without me there.”

“Maybe happier without the competition?” He smirked and caressed Sandy’s back while explaining. “She knows all about Rose’s crush.”

“It’s sweet.” Caroline smiled and looked back at the two of them giving Cassatt a sugar cube or two.

“Sweet. You say that, but she’d gladly steal him from you if she was old enough.”

“Well, when she gets old enough, she can try. I doubt it’ll work.”

Sandy had to wonder if that was meant as a warning for her, but she let it go. She wasn’t even... As Ross rubbed her back, she realized she had no inclination toward Dio any longer. And she did not want Caroline going off with Ross. She wanted to stay with him.

By now, though, it was already arranged and Ross gave Rose a big hug and told her to let them know if she got too tired or chilly or anything, told Caroline to call him if there was any reason, and set a hand on Sandy’s arm with a touch of her eyes as he helped her up into the carriage.

She watched him walk away, back to his car, to take care of things. On his own. And her head shook. “Rose.” She stroked the girl’s head. “Would you mind too much if I go with your uncle today? I’ll come with you another time. Is that alright?”

Her head tilted. “You want to take care of Uncle Ross for me?”

“Well, I want to help you take care of your uncle. Is it okay?”

“Yes.” Rose gave her a big hug. “And you should take care of him when I can’t help anymore, too.”

Sandy couldn’t answer. She checked to be sure it was fine with Dio and Caroline, and jumped down, jogging to catch up. He turned at her footsteps and waited. “Hey. Rose said it’s okay. Can I..? I’d like to be with you today instead. Can I?”

“Not crazy about the horse thing?”

“Oh, it would be wonderful. Another day. With you. I just ... think you need me more than she does today.”

His eyes watered and he wrapped her in tight against him. “Thank you.” It was a light whisper beside her ear.

“Of course. You could have said you wanted me to go with you.”

“Couldn’t disappoint Rose.”

“I think she’s fine with Dio.”

He chuckled. “You know, you could have encouraged Caroline to come with me and you and Rose could have had Dio to yourselves for a couple of hours.”

“I don’t...” Her head shook and she ran fingers up through his hair. “I don’t want Dio. I mean, I wouldn’t even if he was free.”

“No?”

“No.” Holding his eyes, she reached up to give him a soft kiss. “I’d much rather stay with you. You can take me on a carriage ride someday. Just us, or us and Rose. But...”

“I’d love to.” Returning the kiss, his arm pressed into her lower back, holding her against his hard, warm body. “Thank you. This will be easier with you at my side.”

It had been a ridiculously long day.

Leaving the funeral home where he'd mainly listened and nodded, giving in to his sister's request to be cremated, which was also in that note she left, Ross was more drained than he'd been since ... since the day he found out about Rose's heart issues. How many days now had she been on the transplant list? Nearly two years. He used to know by days. Before "the list," they'd tried surgery. Twice. Didn't work. She had to have a new one. Whether that would work or not, they couldn't know. They could only try.

Before he took her out of the hospital, the doctor told him she'd be living in the hospital very soon to keep her monitored if one didn't come through. Rose. His active, happy, loving little Rose would wither and give up being stuck inside one room with only him able to visit. He couldn't stand to see it. She said she didn't want it, to just let go if it went that far. He wasn't sure he could do that, either.

And this... making arrangements for his sister's cremation, his younger sister, was one thing too much.

"Want me to drive?"

Sandy's voice pulled him back from where he was staring at the pavement, beside his car door. "No, it's okay. Sorry. Hold on." He walked around to where she stood by the other door and opened it for her.

"You didn't need to. I just..." She took his hand. "You're shaken. Let me drive. Please."

Giving in since he *was* shaken, tired, soul-heavy, and since Rose wasn't in the car to be concerned with how good or bad a driver Sandy might be, he waited until she went around to get behind the wheel and then got in beside her.

“Don’t worry. I’ve been driving since I was thirteen. I’m not new at it just because I haven’t had a car for a while until the other day.”

“Thirteen?”

“Don’t tell. It wasn’t legal. Sometimes it was necessary. I’ll tell you why another day. Where are we headed? Back to the carriage house?”

“No. Dio’s. He let me know they took her home since she was getting tired.”

“I need directions. I know I’ve been there, the once, but it’s not a route I know.”

Leading as she needed, Ross had to admit she was right. She was a good driver. He let his head drop back against the head rest and let his body slump into the seat. By the time they got there, he easily could have gone to sleep if he hadn’t had to keep his eyes open to give her directions. His body was heavy. And he had several more days to get through.

Sandy took his side as he got out, handed him the keys, and hooked her arm around his as they walked up to the door. Caroline gave him a soft smile, asked how it went, and told them Rose was watching a movie with the boys since she got tired of playing outside.

It made him twice as heavy instantly. The girl never got tired of playing outside, especially at Dio’s with all of the animals and Dio’s boys who were all younger but just as big girth-wise, and stronger at three than she was at eight. They’d learned early on to be gentle with their friend, even if they weren’t with each other. Dio quickly snapped them up by the collar if they got an ounce too rough with Rose. It made Rose feel bad, but Ross assured her they needed to learn how to treat a lady, and he wasn’t hurting them. Dio, no matter what anyone thought of him, mainly due to the scar on his face and his size, would never hurt

those boys. He was sure plenty protective of Rose, though.

“Sit down, Ross.”

Realizing through the haze of fatigue and grief overtaking his brain that Rose had gotten up to give him and Sandy big hugs and settled back in under a blanket beside the quietest of the triplets to watch Rudolph, again, he obeyed Caroline and let Sandy lead him to the love seat where she kept her arm wrapped in his.

They talked some, at a distance from the kids, easy enough to do since Caroline’s family room was more than twice the size of most living rooms, divided into television area and talking area while still fully one connected room. He’d given in to a very small service at the funeral home where her urn would be the focal point along with a few photos. He would be taking young photos, back from her better days. That’s how he would make himself remember her.

He supposed Rose would have to go. Caroline said she needed to go, it was important, but she’d take her home again if it bothered her too much.

Caroline easily convinced him to stay for dinner since she already planned for it and had it in the oven, and with the scent of the beef making his mouth water whenever he went to or near the kitchen, Ross noticed some of the heaviness dissipate through the afternoon and evening until he was nearly numb by the time he said they needed to go so Rose could get to bed.

“She should stay here with us tonight.”

He looked up at Caroline. “Oh. No, I can’t leave her overnight. Thank you, but...”

“I meant you should stay, too. All of you. You’re too tired to drive...”

“Sandy’s driving. She’s a good driver.” He threw her a grin.

“Well, good. Still, you should stay and hang out and unwind instead of going home where...”

“We’re staying at Sandy’s place for a few days.” He caught his friends’ exchanged looks. “She offered me her couch. Rose is in the guest room.” Not that he needed to explain, but it wouldn’t be fair to Sandy to do otherwise. So far, she’d hardly said anything since they got to Dio’s.

“I’d have to offer you the couch, also, unless Sandy wants to share with Rose. The daybed in the library isn’t terribly large, but the downstairs guest room has a queen. Either way, you should stay, have a glass of wine or two, and not worry about driving back. Will you? It’s been some time since we had adult company for more than a couple of hours. It would be nice for us.”

He started to argue, but Sandy cut him off. “It would be nice for you, too.” She caught his eyes. “It’s okay with me.”

“You’re sure?”

“Don’t worry so, Ross. You’ll get worry lines along that beautiful mouth.” Caroline teased the way she always did, getting another roll of the eyes from her husband. And she grinned at Sandy. “He does have the most beautiful mouth for a man, doesn’t he? I never let him live it down, although I’m sure he’s sick of hearing it.”

“He does have.” With a rather timid reply, Sandy caught his eyes, watching for an objection, he figured. “Sorry, but she’s right.”

“There you go. See?” Caroline stood. “I’m breaking out the wine. Too late to turn me down.”

“Let’s do the spiced wine tonight.” Dio made her pause. “I’ll get more for Christmas Eve.”

“Perfect.” With a charming smile at her husband, Caroline promised

to be right back. Ross had to admit he was jealous of that smile, not that he wanted from Caroline. He didn't. He wanted ... hoped, that someday Sandy might be able to look at him that way.

With Caroline back and forth heating the red wine with cinnamon, cloves, orange, and whatever else she used, and getting the boys in bed while Ross got Rose into bed, Dio filled in the conversation, always the gentlemen host, although he far preferred to let his wife do it. When they all settled back in with their warm spiced wine, he asked Sandy how things were at DanceOtica. She hesitated but answered that it was fine.

“Hayes still being his usual charming self?”

She grinned at that. “At least, and worse, maybe, but I’m used to it enough, I don’t even notice most days.”

There was a question in Dio’s gaze that he held back. “Still giving the new girls a hard time?”

“Not so much. He lost too many and had trouble getting enough performers, so he’s backed off on that.”

Caroline snickered as she returned. “About time. Wow, that man is something. All bluster, of course, unlike Cowboy. At least Hayes is harmless...”

Ross cleared his throat. “Um, apparently those rumors about Cowboy aren’t as true as we thought.”

“Really? Because the jerk came onto me often enough before Dio put an end to that.”

“I dated him.” Sandy’s gaze was on the floor, her voice quiet.

“Cowboy. We were together for some time.”

Dio straightened. “He’s...”

“It’s not true.” Gathering her nerve, shown by the way her shoulders straightened, she looked Dio in the eye, maybe for the first time. “One

of the girls who got mad at him for not wanting her more than a couple of nights started the rumors. It wasn't true. He let them spread because ... well, it was a cover. And I know what you're thinking, but I tracked her down, that girl, and asked her outright. She laughed. Thought it was funny that everyone believed her. When it was slow to work, she brought other girls in on it, but it wasn't true. He's... He was good to me when no one else was, when no one else would give me the time of day. He was always good to me. I only broke it off because he got too clingy, worse with time, and it was too much. But he's a good guy. He's not there anymore. He left after I broke it off. I hope he's okay. I can't reach him to find out, but I hope he is."

Silence filled the air and Ross figured she would definitely be glad for that wine when it came. He took her hand and raised it to kiss her fingers. "I'm glad he was there for you. Everyone should have someone who's there."

She nodded, her eyes growing moist, and she lowered them again.

"If you ever get in touch with him, you'll have to extend my apologies." Dio watched her not react. "I did ask him. He never denied it. I worried about you when I saw you leave with him."

Her head raised. "Did you? You worried about me? I never would have guessed it."

"I watched over all of the girls. Call it sexist if you want, but..."

"No, it was sweet. I just... I know I annoyed you."

He grinned. "I was more concerned than annoyed. And yes, I did warn him against ever hurting you, or anyone, but specifically, I warned him about you."

"Why?"

"You weren't hard like most of the other girls. You tried to look it,

but I knew better.”

Brushing at her eyes, she turned away.

“I’m sorry, too, Sandy.” Caroline leaned forward, her voice soft. “I was too into myself at that time, too ... hard, really, and yes, I was hard back then ... to realize taking your position mattered that much. I’m sorry...”

“No, you deserved it. You’re incredible. I was jealous, yes. Still am, really, of your ability. It’s fine. I’m actually looking for something else by now. Should have long ago.” She wiped at her eyes, her gaze still at the floor.

Ross tugged her gently into his arm and kissed her head. “You know how much I love watching you dance, but I’d really love for you to find something else. I’ll help as I can.”

She raised her eyes to his. “I’m very much thinking about just not going back. At all. Hayes will throw a fit about two weeks and such, but I don’t...”

“Let him.” Caroline rolled her eyes. “Who cares what he thinks? It’s not like he’s going to give you a good reference if you leave, anyway, right? Or, maybe he will, but...”

“No, he won’t. But a reference from DanceOtica is not exactly a reference I probably want. And, for the record, I never slept with Hayes. I know what everyone thinks, but I did not. I may not have the pride I should have, but I have that much.”

Caroline smiled. “Good. So screw him. Figuratively, that is. Call him. Use our phone if you want.”

“I should find something else first.”

“Didn’t you do some of the bookkeeping as a fill-in for a while?”

She looked back at Dio. “You remember that?”

“First time everyone got their paychecks on time.”

“Yeah, I offered to take over, but he wanted me on stage.”

“Of course he did. You’re good with office work, then?”

“I used to do that, before I got fired too often and couldn’t get hired again.”

“Fired, for...” Dio leaned forward slightly. “It’s not my business, except...”

“Health issues. I called in too often. That’s handled, though, years ago. Still, it’s on my record, so even if that wouldn’t happen again, I’ll have a hard time convincing anyone it wouldn’t.”

“Understood.” He leaned back again, eyeing her, casually. “I badly need a good office manager at the carriage house. I’ve been doing it, but my hands are full here, and I’m having trouble finding anyone I trust with payroll and such who’s willing to work weekends as needed. Interested? It’s not quite full time. Thirty hours or so, but it comes with benefits.”

“Honestly?”

“If you’re interested, I can show you around the first week of January.”

“Yes. Really? Just like that?”

He glanced at Ross. “I tend to trust his judgment. And he wouldn’t let just anyone around Rose, or bring them here, either. Besides, I’m glad to return the favor. He’s the one who pulled us out of there. Caroline works for him at the theater, and she’s far happier.”

“Best move I ever made.” Ross stroked Sandy’s fingers with his thumb. “Up to now. Just tell him yes. He’ll be a good boss, I promise. And if it’s less pay than you’re getting now, that’s fine, too. At least it will be if you’ll help me sell the house, give up your place, and find an

apartment with me. Before you argue, it can be three bedrooms. You'll still have your space. I'll respect that. I just ... would really like you to not be in that apartment alone anymore."

Her eyes watered again. "Ross, it's ... a lot at once. Okay? Give me a few days to let everything settle before I can even talk about it."

"Also might depend when her lease is up." Dio's look seemed to be telling Ross to slow down, or back off.

"Oh, it's not a lease. I bought it. So I can rent it out, or sell..."

"Even better." Ross was far more relieved than he should have been that she wouldn't have an excuse to stay in her place. "You can of course have whatever time you need. Me, however, I plan to find something pretty much immediately. I just can't ... can't be in that house anymore, and I can't take Rose back there. So..."

"You can both stay with us as long as you need."

He gave Caroline a grin. "Thanks, but, I think until Sandy gets tired of us, I'd just as soon ... keep her from being alone over there."

"Don't use that as an excuse." She threw a teasing warning glance. "I've been alone over there for years. I'm fine. I mean, you're welcome, but you don't like it there, so..."

"It's worth being beside you at night." Maybe he shouldn't have said it in front of his friends, but he was tired, and tired of being careful, and tired of worrying about those he loved.

Getting Rose settled onto the daybed, Ross took Sandy's hand and asked her to step out onto the porch with him. Accepting the blanket Caroline handed him, the one she used to sit out on the porch on cool nights, he set it over the old swing that never looked old due to Dio's constant care of his place, and walked with Sandy out into the yard.

Joined by one of the new dogs, Ross was glad to see Sandy give her a

scratch behind her ears. “You’re Mira, right?” At the nose up into her forearm, Sandy ran her hand along the long brown fur.

“That’s Mira, the one that attached to you at the cookout.”

“She’s beautiful.”

“And nearly as big as you are.”

Sandy chuckled. “Slight exaggeration.”

“Slight. Oh. Hell.”

“What’s wrong?” She pulled her attention from the dog to face him.

“Rusty. I didn’t stop and take him out before we came back here.

Forgot, I was so... I have to go take care of him.”

“I’ll drive.”

“No, stay with Rose. I won’t be long. Have to get my keys from inside.”

Sandy tried to decide how to change his mind, to let her drive. He was too wiped out. Mira tried to follow her in, but Dio shooed her back out while Ross was telling him he had to go take care of Rusty and he’d have to find something to do with the dog.

“I’ll go get him.” Dio took the keys from Ross’s hand without asking and called to Caroline that he’d be right back. No argument from Ross worked.

“Stay with Rose. I’ll bring him here.”

“He’s....”

“I know. He may not be friendly with my dogs. If not, he’ll have to stay in the barn until he is, for his own safety. It’ll work for now.”

Sandy wanted to hug Dio in thanks. Instead, she took Ross back outside to the porch swing where Mira took her side again. They were silent for some time, looking out at the stars and listening to the ocean,

which, from Dio's farm, could be heard easily on quiet nights when the moon was pulling the waves toward shore. A beautiful place. It would be good for Ross to stay with them for a while. Although, she liked having him stay with her, too.

"I would really love for you to move in with us. With me."

At his voice, she had to wonder if she'd said her thoughts out loud.

"I'm not pushing. I only want you to know I'm serious."

"Maybe. In time." The thought was far too appealing. "I'll at least share the room with you tonight so you don't have to sleep on the couch. I mean, if they don't mind. And I only mean to sleep."

He smiled and kissed her fingers. She could definitely get used to a man who would kiss her fingers, a man who would notice a slight shiver and pull the blanket over them both, sharing his warmth, a man who scratched the ears of a dog resting her chin on her leg.

Chapter Twelve

Sandy hadn't told Ross yet, but she called Hayes and quit the morning after Ross nearly begged her to move in with him. That, she was still very much unsure about. Some of it, maybe most of it, was grief for his sister and worry for his niece and he needed someone to be there. She could not give up her own place until she thought it might be more. In time.

She did spend time apartment hunting in Charleston, starting close to his theater because he wanted to be able to walk to work if possible. Every day around everything else, she and Ross stole some time to walk together, anywhere. Some days, Rose went with them. Other days she was too tired and stayed with Caroline instead. And it was getting cold, colder than she'd ever remembered since moving back south. She had to wear a warm jacket when they walked, and her warmest jacket wasn't quite enough the past couple of days.

"Maybe Rose will actually get her wish." Sandy propped her arms over the metal railing of the fishing pier reaching out from the shore of Brittlebank Park over Ashley River and let her gaze fall to the dock area just south of the pier. Despite the late hour and the cold, a few boats were docked there. Insistent fishermen, maybe, who refused to acknowledge how short the days had become. A reddish hue along the bottom edge of the sky, reflecting in the river, told her the gray skies should clear by morning.

From her peripheral vision, she noticed Ross's chest swell and fall almost as much as she heard the sigh. "Maybe we should just take her up north."

“Didn’t her doctor say to stay close?”

“Yes.” He tapped his thumbs on the rail, his jaw set, firm. His eyes, as always since his sister’s short service, distant, tinged with a sadness she couldn’t cut through. “But what does it matter? She’s been on the list forever now. And it’s Christmas in a few days. Her time is short, Sandy. I see a difference in her every day now. You might as well accept that.”

“I can’t.” It came out as a whisper.

“I’m sorry I dragged you into this just to...”

“I’m not.” She turned and grabbed his hands, forcing him to face her at least to an extent. “Ross, I’m not sorry. Whatever... I’m not sorry. You don’t understand how that little girl has changed my life. Maybe you can’t believe in miracles because you haven’t seen one yet. I have. She was ... she is my miracle. I ... I have a tree in my apartment. I bought a car. I’m looking for a better place to live. You know why? Because for the first time since ... since I left home, devastated, broken to bits by people who should have been...” Her head shook. “For the first time, I feel like I’m worth more than what I’ve been doing, that I deserve more than I’ve let myself have. It’s because of Rose. That little girl sees something in me... I don’t know how she does, but she does. And ... whatever happens, between us, I can’t let her down. So, no, I will not just accept it. I can’t. If I deserved a miracle, so does she. More than I do, she does.”

Sniffing back both her emotions and the cold affecting her sinuses, Sandy released a hand to touch his face. “So do you. And I will not give up, on either of you. Believe, Ross. You have to believe.”

“I’ve done that so often already. For what? At some point, you have to...”

“No. You don’t have to. It’s a choice. Everything is a choice.”

“Not everything.” He pulled away and propped his arms back on the wood, his eyes on the soft waves made by a distant boat. “Rose didn’t make this choice.”

“She’s choosing how to deal with it. She’s choosing to hang on. She’s choosing to do everything she can to help you instead of focusing on herself, instead whining about herself as most of us would. We can’t change everything, but we can change ourselves.”

His head shook. “I would give my life for hers. You know how often I’ve asked for that? To make her well and I’d die happy early however it would happen. I’ve asked for that over and over. I guess I don’t get to choose, though. No, we don’t get choices. We get stuff thrown at us and just have to roll with it. Or we choose not to. I guess we can do that. Right, Hannah?” He looked up into the now-dark sky with only a few visible stars.

Sandy was quiet for some time. How did she answer that? He wouldn’t... She was mostly sure he would never make that choice himself. Still, he had a point. There were some things you just had to roll with. Sometimes the answer was no, as her mother told her often enough. The answer... “But, Ross? What if she refuses that option? What if she keeps asking for you to live a long, healthy, happy life? She’s said as much. Maybe her wish is negating yours.”

“It’s not right.” Pushing away from the railing, he treaded toward the canopy that protected fishermen from the heat of the summer sun, and maybe from rain.

She followed, silent, until he got to the farthest edge and propped his arms back over the rail. “I’m nearly thirty years old, Sandy. I’ve lived nearly half my life. She should at least get that much. My wish should

take precedence. Hell, I'm... I'm thinking seriously about ... asking you to stay with me forever, or as long as we both have left, and you're not having children, so you say. What's the point in my longevity, then, if I won't even have..."

"I would." Her voice barely carried over the soft splash of the river against the posts below, over some kind of marsh bird calling out in the night.

Finally, he turned to her, his head tilted. "You would, what? Stay with me forever if I ask?"

"Well, maybe that, too. But I mean, I would have children with you, Ross, if I could. I wish I could. I can't, and I can't change that, either, so I understand about what you can't change. Still, I can decide..."

"Wait." He took her hands and lowered his face toward hers. "What do you mean, you can't?"

"I mean I can't."

"Why?"

"Because... Because I had severe endometriosis from the time I was a teenager and it got to the point I couldn't hold a job because I couldn't function a fourth of my life. I don't mean I was tired of the regular female stuff, and I won't disgust you with details, but..."

"Okay. First, I don't *disgust* that easily. I had to do a lot more for my sister than I should have, meaning picking up whatever she needed and listening to her gripe and whine about it, no offense." He again looked up to the sky. "Second, I don't know what that is, so slow down. You had what?"

The last thing Sandy wanted to do right now was discuss her female issues, but he had to know if he was thinking permanent.

"Endometriosis. It's ... intense pain and ... well, ridiculous fatigue from

very heavy cycles, and not all the iron supplements I could safely take helped anything. Mom said I was being childish. Dad said I was using it as an excuse to get out of school and chores. Not true. When I got old enough to take myself in, she said I was not at all overreacting and the only thing they could actually do was surgery. But that meant... Well, I didn't really want to take away my chance to have kids, so I rode it out, but it got worse, not better, and I couldn't work often enough to keep a job, which is why my accounting training went right out the window. I tried the minor surgery first and it came back, harder. Finally, I just said fine, it doesn't matter. I had to be able to function. So..."

She shrugged it off as she had to herself so often. "So, you won't ever have to listen to me whine, since that's one thing I don't have to worry about. But no, I can't have children. And yes, there's still a chance it can come back and I'd have to do the surgery again. Before you go further with that forever thinking, you need to consider that. I'm not..." Her head shook and she tried to control her own thoughts, her own wish for a possible forever with him, and made herself put him first.

"Ross, you should find a woman you can have children with. You're a good dad and you should be able to have the children you want. We can be friends. I'll still be here for you. But I don't think it should go beyond that."

Silent for some time, looking at her and out at the river, up at the sky, he finally nodded and suggested they should get back to Rose.

He'd nodded. Agreeing.

Sandy gritted her jaw and forced herself to repeat in her mind that it was for the best, it was what she wanted.

"Drop me off at my place, please."

Ross felt himself tense and put the brake on to stop the ease out of the parking area. “Rose will be expecting you.”

“I’ll see her tomorrow. I have things I need to do.”

“Sandy...”

“Please. I think some time on our own would be good about now. You have everything taken care of. Rose is happy with Caroline during the day while you work. I need some time to myself. I do have things to do, Ross. Even if I don’t have a job.”

“You will again soon. And okay, but can I see you tomorrow or are you planning to drop by while I’m at work?”

“Not sure yet.”

With a nod, since he didn’t know what to say, Ross drove her back to her place, walked up to her apartment with her, and gave her a soft hug before allowing her to shut him out. Leave it as friends. She wanted to leave it at friends. Or she thought he did.

Maybe he did. Maybe having a family mattered too much. After everything he’d gone through with Rose, with Hannah, he wanted something more, something stable, something his. After dealing with so many medical issues, so many mental issues, he wanted someone healthy and stable and able to have his children, hopefully healthy children. Was that too much to ask?

In his car with the engine running, he sat and looked up at the dark, at the few stars twinkling. He should go back in to talk rather than leaving it that way. Or not. To be honest, he had no idea what he should do or what he most wanted anymore. Other than for Rose to get a new heart and to have the chance at a long, healthy life. Everything had worked around that since that day years ago when she was still a baby and they said those words: heart defect.

If he lost her...

What would he do next? Keep working, making himself get through the days. Someday he'd date again.

You don't believe in miracles because you haven't seen one.

Sandy, his long-time lust, a stripper, now his friend, believed in miracles. She'd bought a Christmas tree because of Rose. What would happen if the miracle she expected didn't come through? Would she reclaim her job, throw out the tree, never buy another?

A voice inside his head told him to go back in, to go talk to her, not to let her be alone. For what reason? What could he say when he didn't know what he wanted?

Instead, he pulled away, but he didn't head toward Dio's. He went home, to his house. The house his parents left him. Where Hannah took refuge until it was no longer refuge enough. He sat outside looking at it until cold air seeped in through the door to his feet. The *For Sale* sign was out front with the realtor's information. No bites so far, but it was nearly Christmas and had only been a few days. She'd suggested waiting until the beginning of summer when a tourist might decide they needed a summer home close to the beach. He didn't want to wait. He wanted out from under it. Not one ounce of spirit in his body wanted to keep the house for any reason. At least it was one thing he was sure of.

With a sigh, Ross got out of the car and ambled toward the front door. That flowering shrub Sandy liked so much was wilting with the colder temperatures than it was used to having to deal with. He supposed it would come out of it. At least it slowed its growth so he didn't need to trim it again. If she was looking at houses rather than apartments, he'd try to dig up a bit of the roots and transplant it at her...

Maybe they should look at a house. Not an apartment. It would be

nice for Rose, if... It would be nice for Rose. And for Sandy.

Caressing one of the wilted petals between his fingers, Ross realized there was something else he knew without a doubt. He wanted to keep Sandy in his life.

She at least needed to know that.

With hesitation, he unlocked the door, turned on the main light to add to the little entry light he left on so it wouldn't look too vacated, and locked the door behind him. The weight that had lightened some since finishing the arrangements and the service slammed back in. He stood for some time, still and silent, and then went back to Hannah's room.

Everything was tidy, in order, the clutter all cleared away to make it better for showing. Hannah's belongings were in a storage unit until he could deal with them. The place smelled nice; the realtor's doing, he supposed. Floral. Hannah hated floral scents. She liked peppermint, vanilla, even citrus, but not floral.

He stood propped against the frame of her bedroom door and thought about Hannah as a child. She was a sweet child, full of life, mischievous. She'd loved practical jokes, which often drove Ross crazy. Funny how he could miss the days that infuriated him back then: coming home to his clothes all dumped out on his bed, including those on his hangers; finding his new shoes hammered into the floor; sitting on double-sided tape wound around the base of his chair; bringing buddies home from school to find baby pictures of him taped to his headboard, naked, usually.

The girl always had ... a bit of a loose screw. Should they have seen something in her before that day she disappeared?

"Oh, Hannah. I'm sorry." He whispered it into her room, then turned back. Heading to the door, he paused and went to the kitchen to

scrounge for something that would work as a vase. Finding an actual vase stuck in the middle of the table with fake flowers, likely also the realtor's doing, he confiscated it, set the fake carnations in a water glass and set it where the vase had been, and filled the vase half full of water.

On the front porch with the door locked behind him, he pulled out his pocketknife, cut off a few branches of Carolina Jasmine, arranged them in the vase, and propped them on the passenger seat of his car, using his jacket to hold it upright.

Back at Sandy's, he buzzed one of her neighbors to let him in, one he'd met a couple of times going in and out with Sandy, thanked him, and made his way quietly to her door. He didn't knock. He set the vase outside his door and hoped no one would bother it before she saw it.

Chapter Thirteen

To dispel the overwhelming quiet in her apartment, Sandy set her current necklace-in-progress down carefully and went to turn on her radio. The first song made her roll her eyes, so she switched it over to CD and blasted Panic! at the Disco's newest through the small space. Returning to her desk, she was nearly counting the minutes until one of her neighbors knocked on her door to complain about the noise.

Most often, she respected the boundaries of the lack of insulation between apartments and kept it quiet or put her earphones on, but sometimes, you just had to play it loud and let it fill the space around you. After her conversation with Ross, opening herself that much just to have him nod and drop her off at her place, she very much needed her music, loud, encompassing the whole apartment.

The knock came during the third song and she decided to ignore it. Whatever. She heard their noise often enough, usually from the screaming couple who shared far more of their personal business than anyone else had a need to hear. And they were the first to complain about her music.

When it came again, she decided it didn't sound like an angry knock, so she ambled over to check the peephole. Dio. Her body clenched. Why was Dio there? Alone, as far as she could see. Rose...

Throwing back the deadbolt and pulling the chain off, Sandy felt her heart race. "What's happened? Rose? Is she..?"

"No, Rose is fine. Asleep."

"Ross. No, please. He left upset..."

"He's fine, too." Dio studied her, too close.

“Are you sure? Why..?”

“Can I come in?”

“Um...”

“Just for a minute. I won’t stay. I brought something for you, but it looks like someone else did, also. Did you know these were here?” He looked down at his feet.

Following his gaze, Sandy pressed her lips together, holding back her thoughts. The shrub from Ross’s house, her favorite. He’d come back? Why didn’t he knock? Bending to pick it up, she jumped at a wet tongue against her chin, and dog breath.

“Mira.” Dio scolded the dog gently. “Sorry. Didn’t mean for her to startle you. She’s been searching the house for you since Ross got back. Mira, sit.”

She listened immediately, with a look at Dio, her tail wagging like crazy and thumping the floor. One of his new pups, he’d said, although she was nearly full grown. The sweet girl always buzzed around Sandy’s feet.

With Mira nuzzling her leg and hand, Sandy scratched her ear. “You missed me? Wait.” She looked back up at Dio. “Brought her why?”

“Can we come in?”

“Um, yeah. Sorry. Ross is fine?”

“He is.” Following her and closing the door, he stayed at the door. “He didn’t want to leave Rose because she was stirring. She’s okay, only restless. Are those from his place?” He nodded at the vase.

“I would guess so. I didn’t know... He didn’t knock or anything.” Sandy tried to shake off her confusion while she moved to set the vase on her coffee table. “Why..?” Turning back, she could see Mira thinking about moving from his side but still listening, barely held by the leash.

“Okay, why, exactly are you here?”

“He’s worried about you being here alone. I figured Mira might help assuage that worry, since he doesn’t particularly need one more thing on his mind right now.”

It felt like a scold and she raised her chin. “So you intend to leave her here as a guard dog until I find a new place?”

“She’s yours.” Dio brought Mira over and handed Sandy the leash. “He said you own your apartment rather than renting, so you should be able to keep her here, I assume.”

“I... Yes, I... But...”

“Early Christmas gift. Caroline’s idea.”

“But ... she’s...” Sandy stroked Mira’s beautiful fur. The dog was now at her feet, sitting at her side, facing Dio. “I know they’re expensive. Like, really expensive. You can’t just...”

“This one has never warmed to me, or to Caroline much, either. Yes, she would still do her job. She’s claimed you, however, and she’ll be happier with you.” He scratched behind Mira’s ear. “Let me know if you have any issues with her, though I don’t expect you will. She’s good with the boys and with Rose, as you’ve seen. She should be good for you.” Walking away, he opened the door and turned back. “Can I ask you one thing in return?”

She heard herself snicker. “Let me guess. Back away from Ross? I’ve been waiting for it. But if she’s a bribe...”

“Is that what you think?” Dio closed the door again and came up to her, towering over her, naturally, not intentionally.

“I think you think he could do better.” She met him straight in the eye. Never had she ever been afraid of Dio, although some of the girls were, at least until they spent time around him to some extent.

“You think he could do better.” A statement, not a question.

“Of course. And don’t worry. I told him tonight we should keep things casual, just friends. I’m not...”

“That’s why he’s so upset.” With a nod, Dio set a hand gently on her arm. “Sandy, I was going to ask that you not abandon him, at least not yet. If it doesn’t work for you, fine, but give it more time. He’s... Ross is ... an odd mix of more lost and more hopeful than I’ve ever seen him. He’s struggling, with Rose, and Hannah. With ... hope. He’s trying, but...”

She swallowed hard. “He says there’s no such thing as miracles. I’ve tried to tell him he’s wrong.”

“Then he’s given up already.” Dio shoved a hand through his hair. “We can’t let him. Even if ... if something doesn’t come through for Rose... He’s a good man. He needs you right now. At least...”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“No? He mentioned you moving away.”

“Oh. Well, that kind of... I’ve put that off for ... however long. You ... actually want me to stick around? For Ross?”

“You’re good for him. So if you’re okay with it...”

“Of course.” Suddenly sniffing back emotions that threatened to choke her, Sandy brushed at her eyes and turned partly away. Mira nuzzled at her hand. “If Mira was a bribe to stay, it’s unnecessary.”

“No. She’s here to make Ross not worry so much that you’re alone. She’s a good guard dog. And a good companion. She likes Ross a lot, also, but she thinks she belongs to you, so she should.”

“But Dio, she’s... I mean, she’s wonderful. I adore her. But you can’t just give up a dog I know you’ve invested...”

“Not giving her up. Letting her be where she wants to be. I’m going

to go. You can come back with me, if you like. Mira is still yours, whatever you do. I'll bring her paperwork. Forgot to grab it."

Hers. Mira was hers. "Thank you. Even if it's for Ross. Thank you. I'm not sure what I can do..."

"Think of it as a Christmas bonus, if you'd like. Job starts in a few days. She can keep you company there, as well. Did you want to come back to the house tonight?"

"Oh. Um, no. Really, I..." She looked back at her desk where her beads were spread out all over her table. "I have things to do, as I told him. I'll stop by to see Rose tomorrow."

"I'll let her know." He glanced at her desk. "Can I look?"

"If you want, but it's just ... keeping my hands busy." She took Mira's leash off to let the dog wander, partly as an excuse to have something to do while Dio looked at her custom designed necklace in progress, one she planned to give Caroline as a Christmas gift. She had one done for Rose already.

"This is nice. If you're looking to sell any of it, feel free to put it up at the carriage house. Not a lot of traffic there to see it, but some. It's nice work, Sandy. I'm impressed. And I'll get out of your way now." He ambled to the door. "Good night. Call us if you need."

She couldn't answer, too overwhelmed with the way he wanted her to stay with Ross, and with the incredible gift of Mira. Crouching, she stroked the dog when she sat in front of her, the big brown eyes peering at her, as content as can be, or so she seemed. "Well, Mira, I hope he's right and you want to be here. I can't offer as much as they can, you know, just the apartment and some long walks. Will that do, you think?"

A lick to Sandy's chin told her Mira was at least happy at the moment. The apartment was far too small for a large Estrela, though.

She'd have to step up her search for something else.

Returning to the coffee table, her dog at her side, Sandy brushed the soft yellow petals. "Ross. What am I going to do with you?"

Chapter Fourteen

Christmas Eve.

Ross stared out the window at the gray skies while Rose napped on the sofa, Mateo at her side, watching over her as he always did. Ross tried to tell Dio that Mateo missed his sister Mira, but he insisted the dog was fine and only concerned about Rose.

He wondered what Sandy was doing. She'd avoided him since the other night when she said they should be only friends and he didn't argue. He should have argued. By now, he knew that was his mistake.

Every day while he was at work, she came over to see Rose. They painted together; Sandy was teaching Rose some art basics and the girl was doing great with it. Sandy left watercolor paints, watercolor pencils, and a bunch of art paper, as well as some inexpensive beads and string to play with in order to help fill Rose's time since her energy was very low. She'd asked about going north to find snow, but her doctor gave them a definite no. Of course, Ross could ignore that. If it was her last Christmas, she should at least have her greatest wish come true.

Second greatest, so she said. First, she wanted Ross to find his true love and be happy. Then, she wanted snow. Real snow. Not sand snow. Just once.

Ross rubbed his chin and realized he badly needed a shave. More than that, he needed ... Sandy. He needed her to come for Christmas Eve. His chest tightened at the thought. His eyes watered, but he pushed that back.

He missed her.

So she couldn't have kids. They could work around that, as Dio said,

as Caroline said. He was being an idiot not to call her, as Caroline also said. Dio kindly didn't jump in on it, but he didn't argue, either.

"Call her, Ross." A soft hand touched his shoulder and he turned to Caroline's concerned face. "She shouldn't be alone tonight. Call her, for her, if you want, rather than for yourself. Or I will."

"Fine. I'll call. But she may not be by herself."

"Maybe not, but I'm guessing she is. Well, other than Mira."

"I'm going to shave and shower..."

"Call her now. It'll be dusk soon. Call now."

With a sigh, he looked back to see that Rose was still asleep and stepped outside for privacy. If she told him to get lost, he wanted time to himself before having to admit it.

She answered on the third ring. A good sign? "Hey, Sandy. Busy?"

"Um. No. Kind of. Hi. What's up? Rose okay?"

He grinned at her stammering, only until he heard a male voice. Close to the phone, which meant standing close to her. Asking if he should go ahead... with what, he didn't hear. "She's napping. She said you visited earlier. But I'm interfering, so I'll go. Just..."

"No. You're not. Hold on just a second. Okay?"

Hold on? So she could go to where Mr. Whoever wouldn't hear?

"Okay, sorry. I'm free." A pause. "How are you?"

Her soft voice made his chest tighten harder. "I'm fine." His gut clenched. "Actually... I um..." How did he say it? Not over the phone. He had to see her.

"What's wrong? Talk to me."

"Sure you aren't busy? You sound like you're ... entertaining or..."

"No, I'm... I'm not. Either. What's wrong?"

"Where are you?" At her pause, he knew he'd approached that

wrong. “I mean, are you nearby? Can we meet up?”

“It’s Christmas Eve.”

“Right. You have other plans.”

“No.”

“No? Are you sure?”

“I’m ... out on Folly Beach, not on the beach, but in the town. So, yes, we can, but it’ll take me fifteen or so to get back your way.”

“I’m not interrupting?”

“Actually, I would love to see you tonight, if I wouldn’t be interfering with family time, you know. You’re at Dio’s still?”

“I am, and ... hell, Rose is my family and you know she’d love for you to be here.” He paced along the yard, wishing he’d grabbed a jacket. It was cold. Not even chilly, but cold. Why was she at the beach? “Come spend Christmas Eve with us. Please. I’d love for you to be here, too.”

Silence filtered through the line and he turned his face away from the cold breeze as he shivered. “Sandy?”

“Thank you. I’d love to.”

His eyes clenched. *I love you* nearly escaped and his gut clenched, as well. He hadn’t realized just how much he’d missed her. “See you soon. Drive safe.”

Mira jumped out of the car over top of her, wagging her tail full speed and racing up to Dio’s door.

“Great. It’ll look like you haven’t been happy with me.” Sandy rolled her eyes and followed the dog. She wasn’t even to the porch yet when the door opened and Rose came out smiling, wrapped in a coat her uncle was telling her to zip up. In between Mira and Mateo jumping all over each other and Mira nosing Rose, checking on her, Ross caught her

eyes with a nice soft smile.

“Hey. Glad you came.”

“Me, too.” She kissed the top of Rose’s head as Dio told the dogs to settle down and go on and run in the yard, which they did without hesitation. “Wow, it’s cold. I wasn’t expecting this.”

“It’s going to snow!” Rose bounced and took Sandy’s hand.

“Is it? I didn’t hear that.”

“No, we didn’t, either. She’s only hoping.” Ross was still studying her as though he wanted to say something he was holding back.

“It is. I can feel it. Can’t you feel it? Look.” Rose tugged her toward the door. “I painted something for you. Come see.”

With another catch of Ross’s eyes, she gave in to the child and followed to the coffee table, greeting Caroline on the way. Presented with a sheet of watercolor paper, Sandy smiled and kissed Rose’s head again. A snowman, in the snow in the mountains, with a man, woman, and child smiling at the accomplishment, plus a well-lit Christmas tree.

“It’s me and you and Uncle Ross in the mountains with real snow and this is the snowman we made.”

“It’s beautiful. Where did you see mountains to know how to draw them so well?”

“A movie.” Caroline handed her a cup of coffee. “Freshly made. Hazelnut.” She rubbed Rose’s head. “We’ve been watching Hallmark movies. She’s addicted.”

Ross rolled his eyes. “She’s too young for that, you know.”

“Oh, Ross, of course she’s not. They’re perfectly safe.”

“Right. For you, but then she’s not constantly trying to set you up.”

Caroline laughed. “Have a seat, Sandy. Warm up. Pull the blanket off that chair if you want it.”

Gladly giving in, she settled onto the chair.

“So.” Caroline sat across from her and filled in the silence between her and Ross. “What are your Christmas Eve traditions?”

“Me? Oh, I don’t... I’m often working. I don’t really have any.”

“Not when you were growing up, either?”

She thought of the quiet, mostly dark church services they were taken to every Christmas Eve, which she actually loved, until after service when they went home to a mostly silent dark house, was hurried through cold sandwiches and a quick warm soup, and shoved off to bed early, then yelled at twenty times when they made any noise whatsoever in their excitement. “No. Not really. Speaking of; where are the boys?”

“Gathering firewood with Harry and Nelda for our Christmas Eve campfire. We sit out under the stars and sing Christmas carols until they get tired enough they might actually sleep so Santa can come.”

“The snow will put the fire out.” Rose was so matter-of-fact about it, while working on a new painting, her legs folded underneath her at the coffee table, beside the small chair she usually used, that it was hard not to laugh.

“I doubt we’ll get enough to put a fire out, if it snows.” Dio grinned at the girl. “With any luck, the cold will help the boys get tired faster, though.”

Chapter Fifteen

Ross had so much he wanted to say to Sandy while they talked with their friends and the kids all chattered together about snow and Santa and stockings and which of them would get coal instead, all the way through dinner of lamb for the adults and meatloaf for the kids since Dio's boys wouldn't touch lamb. Rose tried it, but shook her head and asked for more potatoes instead. After her surge of excitement when Sandy came over, she was tired again, and quiet.

The boys were already talking about the campfire and Harry teased them, saying it was far too cold for South Carolina young'uns to be outside, they weren't tough enough, which set them all off until Dio hushed them.

Ross thought it might very well be too cold for Rose. However, sitting out under the stars beside the fire with Sandy was something he'd have a hard time giving up.

Sandy hesitated when Ross, sitting on a handmade wood stool in front of the slowly growing fire, offered a hand, suggesting she sit next to him. Rose was on his other side, wrapped snugly in a huge red and green blanket that dwarfed her small, pale frame. She spent more time looking up at the sky than at the fire while Dio's boys ran around in circles, well outside the fire, around the outside of the stools, singing *Here Comes Santa Claus* in terribly raucous little boy voices, at the top of their lungs, with Rusty and the border collies, Hermes and Odysseus, running around with them.

Mira took Sandy's side, again with her chin on Sandy's leg, sharing

her incredible warmth. Her brother Mateo was up against Rose, so Sandy expected the girl should be plenty warm, also. Emerico, the dog Dio bought his wife as a wedding gift and as company for his Estrela lay away from the fire and the ruckus of the boys. A loner, Caroline said, Emerico, which meant kingly or ruler, lived up to his name. He was always at a distance watching everything. Estrela, as her name meant, was still and always the star of the show, of the yard. Being the first Estrela Mountain Dog Dio bought, she was very aware of her place as the first and as Dio's favorite.

Mira meant wonder or peace, depending on the language, Dio said. Caroline thought her name was perfect for a miracle season gift and both were appropriate. While Rose chuckled about the boys and dogs falling all over each other and Rusty continually licking their faces regardless of how often Dio told him to stop, Sandy stroked Mira's beautiful fur, calming herself from both the noise and from Ross so close to her, not knowing what to say to him.

With the way he looked at her, hopeful and wary, both, and the way he sat with his leg touching hers, on the log chair that was barely big enough for the two of them, she nearly put his nod of agreement out of her mind. She couldn't quite. She'd opened up to him as she had to no one else in the world, and he nodded and took her home. Still, he called to ask her to come spend Christmas Eve with them, and he looked so unsure...

He hadn't agreed. He was unsure. A nod was only saying he didn't know what to say.

She shivered, although only her face was cold, and was considering kissing him, lightly, only as reassurance that it looked like he needed since he was even quieter than Rose, when Caroline wrapped a blanket

around them both from behind. “The fire will warm your fronts well enough, but you’ll need this, too. It is awful cold tonight, isn’t it?” She pulled the thing around their fronts halfway and Ross pulled it the rest of the way around Sandy, leaving his side mostly open.

A warmth spread through her body from where their legs and hands touched. To distract herself, and because she wasn’t sure Rose should be out in the cold even with the dog and the fire for warmth, Sandy leaned around him to see her beautiful little face. “Are you warm enough, Baby?”

A sweet smile graced the little face. “Yes. I love fires. Do you?”

“I do. The colors mixing together are beautiful, aren’t they?”

She nodded. “Can you show me how to paint it?”

“Oh, well, I can try. I haven’t painted fire before, but we’ll make an attempt.”

With another smile, the girl turned her focus back to the flames. Sandy felt Ross sigh through his whole body, saw the expression on his face, the emotion, worry, love. He loved that little girl like crazy and Sandy loved him partly just for that. Squeezing his fingers, she caught his eyes and tried to send an “it’s going to be okay” look.

He didn’t believe it. As Dio said, he’d given up.

She would not. Biting back her reservation, and her pride, she reached over to pull his side of the blanket farther in front of his chest, where his jacket was open, also. Taking a chance, and with his eyes locked on her, Sandy released the blanket and set her hand against his chest. Surprisingly, it was warm. She felt it expand sharply. His head dipped closer to her. For a moment, she thought he might kiss her, but his mouth moved beside her ear.

“I’m glad you came tonight. Not only because it’s Christmas Eve, but

because I...” He sighed and dropped his head, his voice softer. “I reacted badly, and I’m sorry. It was ... a shock, I guess, with you being so healthy and in shape and all. I just...”

“It’s fine, Ross. It’s not your issue and it doesn’t have to be.” She felt herself pulling back, distancing, taking her hand from his chest.

He caught it and kissed her fingers. “Maybe I want it to be my issue. Maybe I want ... all of your issues to be mine, also. Sandy, it doesn’t matter. It’s not worth losing you for...”

“For having your own children, that I know you want? Of course it is.”

“We can adopt. You know how many kids need good homes? I ... the theater does a donation drive for them every year. I’ve met so many kids who only need a safe, loving home to be able to thrive. We could do that. I would be happy with that, with you at my side. And then there’s no worry about passing something genetic along. I do worry about that, with Mom, Hannah ... Rose. So, there wouldn’t be that issue...”

“Ross. Hold up.” She felt Mira’s head readjust on her leg and her warm body press in closer.

“I know. Too fast again. I’m sorry again. The thing is, I’ve known since that first night we talked at the diner, actually since you helped us build a sand snowman... Sandy, I’m in love with you. Since that day, I’ve been in love with you. I don’t want to lose you. I can work around almost anything. I don’t care. I’m used to doing that...”

“But, Ross, you should have...”

“I should have a woman I love at my side, a woman who can be my partner, my friend, my strength, my weakness. Everything. One who ... could maybe love me nearly as much as I love her. And I understand if it’s too soon. I get it. Just give us a chance. That’s all I’m asking.”

A shiver slid through her body. Her eyes moistened. Almost as much? Her head shook. “Almost as much isn’t good enough. But...” She felt herself shrug, and then shiver.

He moved the blanket around her better and held it, moving his body slightly closer, giving her his warmth. “I’ll take it. And maybe I’ll hope for more in time. If I can find any bit of hope left. I am trying.”

“I know. I see it.” Maneuvering her arm outside the blanket, Sandy touched his gorgeous lion’s-maned hair, her finger brushing his cold cheek. “I’ll share mine. I’ll share anything I have to give. I love you, too, Ross. I’ve tried very hard not to, but it’s not working. I love you and I love Rose and ... I think you’re maybe the sweetest man I have ever met in my life. I want to be part of that. Sweet is something I haven’t had much of and it’s not in me like it is in you. Strength, I can do.”

He smiled and rested his forehead against hers. “I’ll take it.”

“For how long?” It was a whisper, and she knew she shouldn’t ask, but she had to know...

His head raised and his eyes met hers. “For as long as you’re willing.”

“Honestly? You can know you want that already?”

“Yes.”

“Ross...”

“Snow!” Rose’s voice cut through the cold air. “It’s snowing! I told you it would snow. I told you! Look!”

Gaping at the sky while pandemonium stirred around her, Sandy couldn’t hold the tears back. Rose got her Christmas miracle. Snow. In Charleston. On Christmas Eve. And a partner for Ross. Sandy would say yes to that, anyway, to being his partner, his ... his ... *his*. To being his. Lowering her gaze to watch his expression while Rose danced around, her arms out wide, her head up, catching snowflakes on her

tongue, Sandy went to him. The joy in his face warmed her insides. His arms wrapping around her warmed the rest of her. He was like a lion, her own strong, warm protector. She would gladly be his lioness.

“Okay.”

His head tilted. “Okay, what?”

“As long as you’re willing. And I would love to take in a child or two, along with Rose. She’d love it, I think. Having playmates would be good for her...”

“Sandy.” His expression changed twenty times in twenty seconds.

“You’ll have to marry me first. You realize that, right?”

“Of course. And okay.”

“Okay?”

She realized everyone had hushed and they were all staring. In case he wasn’t serious or wasn’t quite that sure, she shrugged. “In case you ever think about asking or wonder if you should take the chance. Just a warning that I’ll probably say yes, you know, so...”

He dropped to his knee, holding her hand, raising it, her left hand, and kissed her fingers while snowflakes landed in his hair and on his nose. “Marry me.”

“Yes!” Rose closed in, jumping up and down beside them, and then hugged Ross. “Yes! See? I told you this, too. Snow for me and a snow queen for you. I told you miracles are real!”

“Except she hasn’t really said yes yet.” Ross took Rose’s hand with his free hand and shrugged at Sandy. “You know you’ll break her heart if you don’t actually say yes. Mine, too.”

“Oh, great. A guilt trip.” With a grin, she lowered to her knees to look into his eyes. “She’s right, you know. Miracles are real. Yes, Ross. I would love to be yours forever. For better or worse, whatever comes.

Yes.”

Rose jumped on her and she laughed when Ross said he was supposed to get to do that first.

“But I found her for you, so I get the first hug.”

He chuckled. “I guess that’s fair.”

With Rose tucked in and dreaming of Sugar Plum Fairies and Santa’s visit, he went to Sandy who was staring out at the snow. Not only did they have snow, but it was accumulating, so chances were good Rose could build her snowman in the morning, with snow rather than sand.

He wrapped his arms around his fiancée from behind and she leaned her head back against him. “I love you so.”

“I want to show you something. Tonight. Can we?”

He chuckled as she turned in his arms. “Fine with me.” Kissing her lightly, aware that Dio and Caroline were still in the room, although Harry and Nelda had gone on home, he let his hands fall to her hips. “But we’re going to need our own place soon. For ... more privacy.”

“That’s kind of what I meant. I mean, that’s not...” With a light blush, she detached from him and took his hand. “Come with me. Can you? I won’t keep you out long.”

“Out?”

“Out.”

“It’s snowing.”

“I’ll drive. I’m well used to driving in the snow and I’m sure you aren’t, being a southern boy and all.”

“Shows what you know.” With a wink, he asked Caroline to watch over Rose, held Sandy’s coat, and grabbed his keys. “Lead the way.”

She gave him directions that took them onto the edge of Folly Beach,

in front of an old, tall house where white paint was peeling off the front porch railing. His headlights showed dark blue shutters trying to fall off their hinges. Weeds were growing up around the base of the house and smothering a built-up flower garden that needed some restoration.

“What do you think?”

“It looks very uncared-for.”

“Yes, it needs some help. I’m actually pretty handy. I can run a sander and drill and...”

“Hold up.” He turned the car off and took her hand. “Why are we here?”

“I plan to buy it. You have to see the back yard. There’s a gorgeous patio that overlooks a pond, a small pond, but a pond. Yes, it needs some work, too, and there are weeds growing through the patio. I can fix that easily enough...”

“Um, great, but what about the foundation? The interior? Stability? Wiring?”

“Harry came with me to look at it. He said it’s really in good condition. The big stuff, anyway. Worth what they’re asking. The outside is scaring buyers away, but that’s all minor, just some sweat and muscle...”

“You don’t plan to move away anymore?”

She looked back at him. “No. This is your home. Your work is here. And Rose loves the beach. We can take her north now and then during the winter to see a real snowfall. But...”

He leaned in and kissed her, long and hard, passion flaring fast between them.

“Come in and look at it.”

“You can’t just...”

“I have the key. Harry knows the realtor. No one’s been here for ages. The owners are out of state. I wanted to show you, well, tomorrow, but... Come.”

“Are you sure? The porch light is on.”

“They left the electric on to be able to show the house, and the porch light to deter burglars and such. Lights inside are on random timers. It has some nice security features.”

Ross studied the place, the steps, checking their stability, the porch boards that looked sound underneath peeling paint. The railing was good and sturdy. It wouldn’t shake at all.

And the inside... Although all of the wood he saw needed to be stripped and refinished, the winding staircase railing was sound. The place was open and spacious. She held his hand and chattered excitedly while leading him through the main rooms, the kitchen, the laundry/mud room in the back, a little office facing the driveway, and then upstairs to the four bedrooms.

“This is a lot of house. You were planning on buying this for yourself?”

“No. Well, yes, if needed. I thought I could advertise for a couple of roommates. But...”

“But if we’re going to bring in a couple more kids, that’s not going to be feasible.”

“Or necessary. Of course, if you don’t like it, we can keep looking. It’s a steal, really, and with what I’ve saved, I can easily do a good down payment, so the mortgage wouldn’t be high...”

“I love it.” He smoothed his hands alongside her head, brushing his fingers through her hair. “I’m pretty handy, too. Together, we should be able to get it in shape pretty fast. Maybe even in time ... to hold a

wedding here?” He looked up at the winding staircase. “I can just see you all decked out in white walking down those stairs, your train following, straight into my arms.”

“You know, I had that thought myself.”

“Did you, now?”

“The realtor said we could move in by New Year’s Eve.”

“Perfect. I’d say Rose knew exactly what she was doing when she invited you to the ballet.” He kissed her, standing at the window of what would be the master bedroom, as glistening large snowflakes fell through the dark.

Epilogue

“How do I look?”

Sandy smiled at Rose all decked out in her elegant nightgown-dress and her pink ballet shoes. “You’re gorgeous. Are you nervous?”

“No.”

“No? Really?” She waited while other cast members went by wishing little “Marie” well on her premiere.

“I was born to be Marie.” The child’s smile lit her face, complete with a pink blush that was part stage makeup and part her own.

“Yes, you were, my little angel. Have fun out there. Okay?”

“You, too.”

“Are my girls ready and set to go?” Ross’s smile was nearly as big as Rose’s.

“We are. How about you?” Sandy gave him a half hug. He was so elegant in his stage tux, with his reddish blond mane tied back into a Victorian ponytail over the collar.

“I am not. I work behind the scenes for a reason. I can’t believe yet that you both talked me into this.”

“Of course you can. When have you ever been able to tell either of us no?”

He snickered with a shake of his head and planted a kiss on both of their foreheads. “How about we keep that to ourselves?”

Getting lost in the backstage excitement of opening day of *The Nutcracker*, Sandy couldn’t believe it had only been a year since she’d been in the same theater, in box seats, so nervous to be at Ross’s side. When Caroline, now acting producer for the ballet, insisted Sandy had

to be in the production as one of the adults at the beginning, she agreed with little hesitation. Rose had worked her tail off as soon as she had clearance from her heart doctor to take ballet lessons. She had several years of work ahead of her before she could graduate to toe shoes, but Caroline cast her as the young Marie and promised she could play the older Marie part in later years if she kept going with her lessons.

After a couple of scares with her new heart, found just after the beginning of the new year, she'd recovered quickly. Knowing it was given a reprieve, the little body grew in jumps and her activity level was unmatched. Ross had finally calmed enough about her health to agree to start visiting children in placement waiting for good homes.

There were so, so many, Sandy sometimes cried when they left a visit. But they'd taken in two sisters, seven and nine, both of whom got along well with Rose and already treated her like a little sister even if she was as old as the oldest, so it was all settled except for the paperwork, if the girls agreed.

Today, she looked forward to being on stage with her husband, playing the part of a couple at a Christmas party, and knowing she got to be the one to take him and their daughter back to their real home.

Next weekend, after *The Nutcracker* had run its course, was cookie baking day with their new to-be daughters joining the fun, along with Dio and Caroline, their three boys, and their baby girl, who often kept Sandy company while she worked at the stables.

On Christmas Eve, they would have the girls over for the night, show them the bedroom she and Ross had been getting ready in their favorite colors and styles, and offer to adopt them. Sandy looked forward to working with their reservations and wariness and bringing them into a new life full of hope where they could believe in miracles again.

She especially looked forward to two days before Christmas when she and Ross and Rose would drive up to a rented cottage in Connecticut and hope for a lot of snow over the two weeks they would hide away to regroup and rejuvenate from the past year's events. Sandy couldn't believe how much she hoped to be able to build a snowman.

~~~

Thank you for taking the time this holiday week to read my first Christmas novella. It will undergo some edits before its final release in July. Comments are very welcome and can be emailed to [ellamkaye.author@gmail.com](mailto:ellamkaye.author@gmail.com)

If you're interested in reading more of Caroline and Dio's story, find *Pier Lights* at most any eBooks and/or paperback retailer. The other two books of the Dancers & Lighthouses series are *Shadowed Lights* and *Pieces of Light*. You can find more info about this series as well as the Artists & Cottages series and the upcoming Songwriters & Cities series on my website. All books can be read in any order. <http://www.ellamkaye.com>