



My
Christmas
Wish
EMBER CASE

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Putting the past to rest has never been this much fun.

Tara Walsh has come a long way from paying her dues in a smoky New Orleans club. Her albums sell millions, her tours sell out and she has a hit DVD. Her name is known around the world. Now she's back home for a holiday charity concert—and to say a proper goodbye to the past. A past named Duncan Rouse.

Five years ago, Duncan pushed Tara away for one reason: to force her to reach for the stars. She deserves the life she's earned, even though it left him with a broken heart that's never healed. Having her back in his arms only makes the pain worse, yet the last thing he can do is beg her to stay.

One wild, passion-filled night in the sexy Cajun's bed has Tara's body singing with pleasure. But can they both get what they want this Christmas?

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, second chances, making up for lost time with a sexy Cajun, and Christmas wishes that might really come true.

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Dedication

To Editor Extraordinaire, Heidi Moore. Your sharp eye, honest answers and emails asking “So, what are you working on next?” are always there right when they need to be. I’m so grateful to have you in the navigator’s seat.

And always, to my husband. You remind me every day what love is all about. You’ll always be my Christmas wish.

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Chapter One

Music pounded through the crowded New Orleans nightclub, spilling out the doors propped open to the cool late December night. Lines at the bar were deep with thirsty revelers celebrating the season's cheer. Tara Walsh moved slowly through the rowdy crush, second thoughts already trying to sway her feet towards the exit.

It wasn't too late for her to turn back yet. She could be out the front door in an instant. It would take only minutes to catch a cab to the hotel, and in fifteen minutes she could be relaxing in the solitary quiet of her impersonal, five-star luxury suite.

By morning she could forget all about this ill-conceived walk down memory lane. By the end of the week she could be back in her cold and lonely bed in LA and back to being haunted by thoughts of what might have been if she'd only had the guts to go after what she wanted.

Second thoughts were a bitch.

Her chance to run disappeared before she could decide.

"Bonjour. Welcome home, Tara."

Her name became something special, turned into a sound of magic on Duncan Rousse's tongue. Goose bumps shot down her arms and her toes curled with pleasure inside expensive leather boots. From the tips of her painted toes to the top of her suddenly buzzing head, her entire body warmed at the sound. Just his voice was enough to make her suddenly alive with the delight of being home.

"Hello, Duncan." She felt as if someone had pushed a few thousand volts of pure energy through her veins. Every nerve in her body was awake, throbbing, hungry with a need she had tried so hard to bury for the past few

years. The urge to flee disappeared as she turned slowly, forcing her face to show nothing more than a politely friendly mask.

Even in three-inch heels she had to look up to catch his gaze. She took her time doing it and breathed deep, bracing herself for the impact.

Then she forgot how to breathe as she met the deep blue eyes that had haunted her dreams since she'd left her heart behind.

Duncan Rousse, the first man she'd loved. Hell, the only man she'd loved. And the one who'd all but packed her bags in his haste to get her out of his life five years before.

He stood at ease, his black linen shirt draped elegantly over the firm lines of leanly muscled shoulders and chest. Loose trousers draped long legs, covering all but the toes of the shoes that peeked out beneath. His clothes said working man more than business man. Duncan wore both titles with comfortable style.

He was as gorgeous as ever. His hair was shorter than she remembered, the coal-black strands cropped close to his head. Harsh new lines framed his mouth, adding a distinguished mark of experience to a face she had remembered as laughing, care free—young. Duncan had aged, but he'd done it as gracefully as he seemed to do everything else that had ever been thrown at him.

His lips tipped up and the temperature in the bar shot from warm to sizzling.

“You look great, *mon bébé*. LA has been good for you. The photos don't do you justice.” His long-lashed gaze flickered to the front door where a near life-sized publicity poster of her hung for the “Christmas in the French Quarter” charity concert.

The advance PR team had blanketed the city with the damn things. Everywhere she turned since stepping off the plane her face was staring

back at her. The photo came from her last tour, for her *Blue Vixen* album, and showed her in midnight blue leather that hugged her full frame from toe to throat. It was a skin-tight body suit that had made her body as famous as her voice. She'd finally embraced, even flaunted, the curves she'd always fought to squeeze into dresses better suited for the stick-thin body of a model. Besides keeping her album on the charts for forty-four weeks and counting, the photo had sold a hell of a lot of posters.

A part of her was proud that the live charity concert she'd come to New Orleans to perform was going to let her give something back to the city that had been the only real home she'd ever known. But it was a shock to walk the familiar streets and see her image plastered on every window and street post.

Duncan shifted his eyes back to her from the poster. Tonight the expertly lightened and layered blonde tresses in the picture were hidden under a cap, giving her welcome anonymity but leaving her feeling exposed with no hair to hide behind. The bronzed skin of her shoulders and upper chest were exposed by a white lace vest. He seemed to appreciate the best that West Coast salons and tanning spray could offer. His gaze lingered longer on the curve of her hips, where dark denim encased the muscled legs that could strut and dance across a stage for hours. When he saw the three-inch heels on the thigh-high black leather lace-up boots, her eyes were drawn to his full lips that tightened briefly. Amusement or disapproval?

Looking at his lips had been a bad idea. Tara had too many memories of what they had felt like against her own. What they'd sounded like telling her goodbye.

She pushed the thought aside. Better to think about what they sounded like saying hello.

Dragging her gaze back to his, she thought she saw the glow of hunger there. “I stayed away too long, Duncan. It’s good to be back.”

“We were starting to wonder if you’d left us behind forever.” His voice was as warm as her memories.

“It was hard to leave.” She held his gaze and saw the faint flinch as he recalled how she’d left. “It was harder to come back.”

He nodded slowly, accepting with that simple gesture both her leaving and his role in it. For a minute there was only the sound of the music and the feverish noise of the crowd on the dance floor surrounding them.

Memories of how it felt to be held in his strong arms filled the lull. Dangerous memories that she’d relived a thousand times in her dreams. How many times had they danced on that floor, his arms pulling her tight while she thought she’d found her home at last? She’d begun to believe in love and dream of happily-ever-after. Then her dreams had turned into nightmares and left her the way she’d been since she was eight years old. Alone.

You couldn’t change what had already been, and wishing for things to be different wasn’t going to make them so. With a mental shrug, Tara put the past where it belonged—away.

“The club looks like it’s doing good business. I was in Miami a few months ago and your new club there had a line out the door that stretched three blocks. You’ve done well with them.”

“*Mais*, we were lucky after the storms. The Brick Lady held up well to Katrina, better than many of the other buildings in the Quarter. We had to replace some of the tanks in the brewpub and we had to strip the first floor walls down to the studs. Some of the locals think the ghosts held off the worst of the flood waters and protected what they consider theirs.” He chuckled.

“Stranger things have happened in the French Quarter.” She let the smile that had always come naturally to her lips show, relaxing as the old feeling of intimacy came back. With Duncan it had always been this way, ever since the moment they’d met. When he was around, the rest of the world faded into the background until it was just the two of them. Nothing and no one else mattered.

Not even a stepmother driving a wedge between her beloved stepson and the young woman who had dared to make a place for herself in Duncan’s world.

“How’s Marie? Is she here tonight?” Tara tensed as she glanced over his shoulder, almost expecting to find the older woman staring her down from across the room.

“She doesn’t come down here much anymore,” Duncan stated grimly.

“No? Have you moved back home then?”

“Not bloody likely—I still live up over the club when I’m here in New Orleans.” He gestured vaguely towards the back hall, where she knew steps led to his private rooms above. “Marie learned she’s happier sticking with her Garden Society friends than poking her nose into this part of the family business. And she’s busy these days trying to find a wife for Stephen before he marries himself to the corporation.”

Duncan’s older brother had always had a head for business. It wasn’t a surprise to hear he had taken a larger role with the family firm. Tara relaxed again, reassured that the dragon lady wasn’t going to be bearing down on them tonight.

“Are you home to stay?”

“Just until after the show.” Two short nights. Tonight and Christmas Eve, the night of the performance. The clock was already ticking.

“So you head back to la-la land on Christmas Day?” Was that disappointment in his voice, or was she only wishing it was there?

“I’ve got a six am flight back to LA—I’ll be on the West Coast in time for brunch.” Los Angeles couldn’t have seemed further away than it did right now. And without anyone special to spend it with, Christmas would be just like any other day. An hour or two in the gym, another afternoon in the dance studio, some time working on songs for the album she was due to start recording in late January. Another holiday alone. Yet another thought she tried to push out of her mind.

“Have a drink with me, *chère*.” She wasn’t sure if he was pushed towards her from behind by the crowd or if he’d stepped closer. She didn’t care as his body was right where she most wanted it to be, pressed tightly to hers. Chest to chest, thigh to thigh, the heat that rose from his skin spread across her own and brought an ache of longing that throbbed through her veins.

Then he was bumped from behind, pushed suddenly forward by an overexcited patron making a move to the bar. As his arms tightened around her waist to steady her, she felt his pelvis forced against the gentle mound of her belly. Feeling his warm body pressed against her own brought a damp weakness to her core. Gut-wrenching, mind-shattering need claimed her body and left her quivering in his embrace.

“Yes.” The word slipped out. His throat was mere inches from her lips, and the familiar smell of him filled the air she breathed. Surrounded with scents of evergreen and spice, her mouth flooded with the remembered taste of his skin beneath her tongue. The urge to lick her way up the firm column of his neck possessed her.

She tilted her head back instead. His eyes were narrowed, the hot fire in their depths mirrored by the dark flush rising on his cheeks. Hard hands

clenched on her hips with demanding strength, feeding the hunger that had sparked to life when he'd first said her name.

Before she could fight it his lips were on hers, devouring, possessing, sweeping away her ability to think. With the touch of his mouth all the need of five long years roared to life. The taste of him, the scent of his skin, filled her senses, left her gasping for more. She was lost, drowning in the heat of his embrace. Her heart leaped, blood pounding furiously as her body molded itself to his warmth.

She cried out softly when their lips were torn apart. The low sound was swallowed by the crowd as their bodies were separated by the jostling of the people surrounding them. Her eyes flew open

Her heart was more vulnerable than she'd ever believed.

Maybe coming to see Duncan wasn't the smartest decision she'd ever made.

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Chapter Two

Tara was home.

She was waiting for him now on the upper level. He looked up, watching as she found a relatively quiet space by the rail overlooking the packed dance floor before he stepped behind the bar for their drinks. After five years she looked delicious as sin and twice as tempting.

Duncan felt like he was standing on the edge of forever, looking down a long black hole. Was this the path to hell or salvation?

His throat closed as he looked up again and her gaze met his. Her eyes were dark, shadowed with secrets tonight. The cap she had perched at a jaunty angle hid her curls, and her smooth shoulders and slender neck were enticingly exposed. Her mouth was an invitation to sin, the lips ripe and red and so sweet he was still savoring her taste. Slowly, she stroked the polished wood of the rail in front of her, and his cock ached as he imagined them wrapped around his hardness.

She was sex and fire wrapped into a package of flesh and satin. The moment she had walked into the club he had felt his body awaken. Desires he had buried years ago roared back to life.

Duncan hadn't been ready for the emotions that came with seeing her. Since the promotional posters had gone up the week before, he'd been unable to get her out of his mind, wondering if she'd come in to see him or if he'd be driven to go to her. Driven to have her.

Forced to let her go again.

His gut clenched at the thought. He didn't know where he had gotten the strength to send her away the first time. How the hell was he supposed to let her go again?

Tara. Sweet, funny, sexy Tara. She'd found the stardom she deserved when she'd reached the West Coast. The producer who had first seen her perform in Duncan's small, smoky bar had known talent when he'd seen it. Two CDs, a sold-out tour and a performance DVD had come in the past five years—and that damn poster that was every teenage boy's wet dream.

He couldn't keep his eyes off her as he climbed up the stairs to the balcony level with their glasses in his hands. Her luscious ass looked like it had been poured into the faded denim that covered it. Those seemingly endless legs, long and muscled, were driving his already overactive imagination crazy. One black leather boot was propped casually on the bottom rung of the rail, hugging her leg from the knee down. The spiked heels added several inches to her slight build. No longer a half-grown girl, she was all lush curves and womanly grace.

Since she'd left, not a day had gone by that he didn't wonder how things might have been if she had stayed. Now she'd come home to New Orleans, giving him the second chance he didn't think he'd ever have. He had two nights before she headed back to the West Coast.

He'd have to make the most of them.

"Here's your Brick ale." He handed her the glass of beer she'd asked for as he slid in beside her at the rail. Her cheeks were pink from his kiss, and he imagined where else her skin had flushed.

"Thanks." She sipped at the beer, murmuring appreciatively at the rich taste of hops and malt. "You still make the best brew in the Quarter."

Her low, husky voice echoed with the flavor of the South, deep and rich and sweet as Louisiana molasses, unchanged from the years in California. It wrapped him in a velvet embrace, pulling him closer so he wouldn't miss so much as a whisper from her lips. He swallowed hard to clear the sudden tightness in his throat.

“You missed Santa’s visit. He was here a few hours ago, listening to last-minute Christmas wishes and handing out early presents to all the good girls and boys in the Quarter.”

“I’m not sure I’ve been good enough this year to get a present from Santa.” Her dark eyes glanced up at him teasingly through long, lush eyelashes.

“Did you ask him for something special this year? Even grownups are allowed to have a Christmas wish.” His gut clenched. He wished he had her in his arms again.

“I’m afraid I stopped waiting for my wishes to come true a long time ago. I learned you have to work for what you want, and even then you may not always get it.” Her tone was still playful, but he could sense the pain hiding behind her smile.

“You’ve always worked hard. Even when you were first on stage here, you knew that it was going to take more than just looking great and sounding like a goddess on that stage to make it to the top. I never saw anyone that was willing to work as hard as you were, Tara. That was one of the things I admired most about you.” He tapped his glass against hers in a small salute.

She shrugged, looking pleased at the praise. “How about you? Did you have any Christmas wishes for the jolly man in red?”

“I think they just came true.” What was meant to be a flirtatious remark slid out instead with the ring of honesty. He was tempted to cover the comment with a joke, but the look of pleased surprise in her eyes kept him quiet.

Her lips parted when she smiled, her even, white teeth flashing.

“You’ve changed a bit, Duncan Rousse.”

“Is that a bad thing?” He knew one thing that hadn’t changed. The way he felt about Tara. He felt more alive standing next to her than he had in all the years she’d been gone.

“Not bad. You’re a bit calmer, more mature. Before it was all good times and laughs. Oh, you ran the club and did a kickass job of it. From the day you walked into The Brick Lady you made sure that business got taken care of. But it seemed at first like it was a bit of a game to you, a way to show your stepmother you were ready for some responsibility but still have fun. *Laissez Les Bon Temps Roulez*, and all that.”

“I still know how to have fun, Tara. I’d be happy to show you if you think I’ve forgotten.” He shied away from the painful memories of the past that her words brought up. Casually, he traced a hand up the delicate skin of her neck, tucking a stray strand of hair back under her cap.

“Maybe you’ll get that chance later. But first I want to know what happened to make the playboy learn how to be serious.” She smiled when she said it, but he knew she wasn’t ready to be distracted from her questions yet.

“Playboy? Ouch. You wound me.” This time her smile was smaller. “You know that when you and I were together there wasn’t anyone else.”

“I know.” A more somber look crossed her face. “Although the gossip pages were full of the tales of the Rowdy Rouse boys long before I met you.”

She was right. Before he’d met her he’d been enjoying his freedom. Just out of college, he was interested in little more than one fun night after another. With his brother Stephen he’d been eager to sample every sweet sin that was so easily found in New Orleans. Even buying the club had started out as a game to him, done largely to annoy his uptight stepmother and give

him an excuse to get out of Marie's house and live the wild bachelor life his twenty-three-year-old self had itched for.

As he'd expected, his stepmother had been outraged when she found out he had no intention of stepping into the position she'd planned for him at the Rouse corporation. The Rouse family owned property across the South, but it was investment property. They didn't get their hands dirty with actually running the businesses themselves. He'd been as surprised as she was when it turned out he had a knack for running The Brick Lady.

Then he'd met Tara. And he'd learned there was more to life than late nights and parties. Orphaned at twelve, she'd spent the next six years being passed around from one home to another by Child Services. By the time he met her she was working two jobs to put a roof over her head and pay for voice lessons. Seeing her working to pull herself from the brink of poverty after leaving the foster-care system had taught him more about life and the kind of person he wanted to be than his four years as a frat boy in college ever had.

For a few short months he'd had it all—the satisfaction of knowing he was good at something, the independence of being able to do it on his own, and most important, the love of a woman he adored.

“Maybe I just needed to meet the right woman to know it was time to grow up.”

He watched her consider his words and saw the uncertainty in her eyes. The silence grew while he gave her time to think about what he'd said.

“Stop staring. You'll give me a complex.” She sounded just a bit flustered as she teased him, lightening the conversation.

“I'm not staring so much as enjoying the view. There's nowhere else I'd rather be looking than in your sweet chocolate eyes. A man could melt into them and never want to find his way out.”

“*Dieu*. You’re as full of it now as you were then, Duncan. That Cajun charm doesn’t work on me anymore.” Her face went very still. Clenching her fingers tightly around the glass, she took a large sip before sitting her drink on the table.

“Who said it was nothing but charm? Look at you, *chère*, all grown up and twice as beautiful as ever. I may be a fool, but I’m not blind or dead. I’d have to be one or the other before I could stop looking at you.” He held her gaze, willing her to see the sincerity in his eyes.

Her lips trembled, quivering with emotion even as her stubborn chin shot out in challenge. Awareness flashed between them, and he reached out to cup her face.

“Is looking all you plan to do?”

“Plan would imply I’m thinking logically about things right now. Dream, wish, need... There’s a list as long as my arm of things I’d like to do to you. A few of them may even be legal.”

The people around them might as well not even have been there. The crowd faded from his mind until it was just the two of them, their bodies close enough that he could feel the heat rising from her skin. He watched longingly as her mouth quivered, felt the shallow puffs of air stir the currents as her breathing sped up.

“Tara...” He whispered, wondering if she even heard it above the music below.

A long look passed between them as he acknowledged the past and considered the now. Then she moved, leaning in and rising to her toes to press her lips to his. Soft, full, they brushed against his mouth tenderly and then opened with a throaty moan.

Desire unfurled inside him, the great hunger of a beast that had been promised a meal only to be fed crackers for five long years. He opened his

mouth to hers, welcoming the moist heat of her tongue as it teased him with her sweetness.

And he was lost. Swallowed by the taste of her, the scrape of lips on teeth, the plunge of tongue that feasted on hunger.

His body ached. His cock throbbed with the need to have her. Cupping her luscious ass in his hands, he lifted her against him, sinking into her sweet mouth, desperate to feel the length of her body pressed fully against his own. She wiggled her hips sinuously against his own, circling her hands around his neck, moving her lips urgently against his in answer.

“Get a room, guys.” Distantly, he heard the laughing voice of a stranger as a group passed by. His control in tatters, Duncan wrenched his lips away, burying his face in the curve of her neck.

“Wrong place, wrong time.” His voice was thick, hunger coloring his words. Sternly, he willed his body to relax, hoping his iron-hard cock would follow the order.

“When will it be the right time? Right place?” she asked huskily. Her lips were nibbling a line of sweet kisses up the side of his throat, licking lazy circles in the hollow and driving him slightly insane with need.

“Tonight. I can’t turn the floor over to the manager until the band finishes, but they’ll be done in about an hour. Stay and wait for me?”

Tara rose to her toes again to briefly press her mouth to his. Her hungry eyes full of anticipation, she nodded once. “I thought you’d never ask.”

His belly pitched at the promise in her voice. Deep inside he felt the ice that had protected his heart for the past five years melt just a little.

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Chapter Three

Tara watched as Duncan crossed the club floor below her. He checked with the doorman and bouncers before stepping behind the bar to have a talk with his manager. From here he seemed like the cool businessman overseeing his club. But a few minutes earlier he'd been all passionate male, his body hard and eager against hers. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and tried in vain to calm her pulse.

Why was she so nervous? She had come to the club tonight for one reason—to show Duncan what he had turned away from five years ago, and to lay her bittersweet memories to rest. It had been pure pleasure to finally have Duncan's hands on her skin once more, feeding the hunger that had been growing unappeased in her dreams. She just hadn't expected to have such a hard time keeping her head once she was back in his arms.

The energetic crowd in The Brick Lady flowed around her, an intoxicatingly sensuous mix of sweat-coated skin and denim, silver studs and tattoos, flowing hair and silk. With Christmas only two days away the clubs in the Quarter had an extra dose of frenzied festivity in the air. Drinks flowed across the bar, bodies moved to the recorded beat of dance music while the band was on break, and it seemed half the city was determined to enjoy a Bourbon Street holiday. More than a hundred people squeezed into a space meant for far fewer bodies. The bouncers were earning their keep, holding back the line at the door until some of the partiers had their fill for the night. Tara headed down to the dance floor instead of following Duncan towards the bar. She'd let him come to her when he was ready.

Around her the music had changed. The tempo slowed from the fast-paced dance number to a slower, bluesy measure. It was a pulse she knew

well—the song was from her last album. Hearing her own music played on the radio or in a club always seemed surreal, the voice sounding like that of a well-known friend, but not herself. Usually she'd shrink back a bit, study the people around her, marveling that they seemed to love something she'd created. Tonight she embraced her temporary anonymity, letting the familiarity of rhythm and lyrics surround her and calm her nerves.

She slid into a spot on the packed dance floor, let the crowd swallow her, and was swept into the tune's familiar embrace. There was very little in life that couldn't be made better with the magic of song. Even a long-broken heart.

Bass throbbed in the sultry air, vibrating the wooden floor beneath her feet. The rhythm was waiting for her, as much a part of her as breathing or eating. Arms, shoulders rose to curve above her head. Legs stretched and bent, hips swayed and thrust with the beat. The lyrics flowed around her, words of loss and rebirth. Loneliness and comfort. Nightmares and awakening.

Tonight was all about the awakening.

Willingly she slid into the song's embrace. It was the music that had brought her to The Brick Lady six years before, hoping to get a chance on stage at the monthly open mic. She'd been too young to drink at the bar, but old enough to be on stage. And so the stage had become both family and friend to a girl that had neither. From open mic to a weekly gig—at first on the dreaded slow Wednesday nights, not a huge risk for the club. But she'd made her mark, begun to build a fan base, and soon had formed her own band. Within a year they were the house band and owned the coveted Saturday-night slot on the schedule.

She'd begun to dream. Not the little dreams of knowing there would be food in the cabinet or money to pay the rent. But bigger dreams where there

were friends to hold on to, people who gave a damn if you showed up late, who missed you when you didn't show up at all.

Then the club's new owner had walked into her life, and she'd begun to reach for the biggest dream of her life. She'd fallen for Duncan Rousse before he'd even settled into the rough apartment over the club. The moment his bold eyes first met hers she'd been gone. Every thought became focused on one thing, one person's wants, one person's needs. He was the center of her world. And like the naïve girl she had been, she'd actually thought for a while that she'd become the center of his.

God, what a fool she'd been.

His stepmother had taken great pleasure in reminding her that dreams didn't come true for people like her. Street people may pull themselves out of the gutter, but they didn't land in the satin sheets of the Rousse's Garden District home.

Five years ago she had scraped her heart off the floor, held on to her pride, and run away. Straight to LA and the recording contract that had been waiting for her there. She'd had an unbelievable streak of fortune ever since, riding her debut album straight to the top of the rock charts. She wasn't a scared little girl anymore. She was all woman now, and millions of fans around the world would laugh themselves silly to know that she spent her nights alone, dreaming of the man who'd turned her away.

She'd come back to the city she loved, pushed by her agent into appearing in a "Christmas with the Stars" charity event. She'd come back to the hometown she'd avoided for years. The next two days would be packed with rehearsals, fittings and media events before the sold-out performance. But these few hours were all hers.

Tonight she'd seduce Duncan, show him what he'd missed and find out if she could start to forget the past. It was time to show Duncan what he'd

turned away from when he told her goodbye. And this time she wasn't taking no for an answer.

Tonight she'd chase away the memory of all the empty nights that had haunted her since she left. And when she left this time it would be because she had an entire life waiting for her half a world away, not because she was running from her past. Tara Walsh was tired of running.

The band took the stage as the last notes of her song faded away. They were young, their fans were rowdy, and soon Tara was enthusiastically moving to their zydeco-infused rock.

But it was more than the music that had her blood thrumming through her veins. Knowing Duncan was watching her, feeling his gaze follow her, was keeping her on the sharp edge of desire.

She wondered if he'd thought of her while she'd been gone. Had he spent even a night thinking about what-ifs and what-could-have-beens? Something in the way he kept her in his sight during the final set tugged at her heart. He'd kissed her senseless up on the balcony and left her with a desperate, throbbing ache.

Her cheeks grew hot as she remembered their abandoned embrace. That hadn't been the kiss of a stranger. It had been the heated, soul-touching caress of a lover. Her body remembered the heaven she'd known in his arms, even though her mind had spent years trying to forget.

The thought stayed with her through the rest of the set. Every time she caught Duncan watching her she burned just a bit hotter.

She glanced at her watch as the band finished their last song to raucous applause. Time had slipped over from one day to the next, and it was officially Christmas Eve. Around her people headed to the bar for another drink to celebrate what remained of the night. Someone slipped a jazzy

holiday recording in and the pre-recorded music played while the band packed up their gear.

Tara shivered when she thought of her plans for the evening ahead. As the crowd began to thin, she caught a glimpse of Duncan giving his staff a few final words for the night. The pretty young bartender listened, nodding agreement to Duncan's instructions while she served the thirsty people that demanded another drink.

Then Duncan was crossing the room, his gaze scanning her from head to toe. Without a word, he pulled her into his embrace, sliding his arms around her and tucking her under his chin as his body aligned perfectly with her own. He swayed slowly with the music, just enough that what they were doing could be called dancing. It was sweet torture feeling his muscled thighs brush against her own, one leg sliding with firm pressure between her denim-covered legs. Her body melted into his, seduced by his heat and strength. The reality was so much better than her memories.

He moved his palms in arousing circles against her lower back, stroking her through the thin material of her shirt. Angling his head lower until she felt the brush of his lips against the sensitive curve of her ear, he whispered, "Merry Christmas Eve, *chère*."

Her stomach clenched at the endearment, her body tingling in reaction. Unable to resist, she turned her nose into the tanned skin of his neck, breathing in the long-missed masculine, spicy smell of him. With her lips pressed to the pulse that was suddenly pounding in his throat, she gave in to the impulse and licked a slightly damp line up his neck, nibbling teasingly at his chin on the way. He angled his head down, and he pressed his mouth to hers.

Unlike his scorching kiss from earlier, this time he moved his lips slowly, unbelievably soft against her own. Tenderness where she had

expected heat, stoking her own hunger higher. Gently, he nipped at her lips, teasing and caressing until she opened to him with a sigh of need. And just that quickly she was lost in him, the smell of him, the feel of his mouth. Cupping his face in her hands, she rose to her tiptoes, eager for a larger taste of the heaven he held in his touch.

Forcefully pressing her lips to his, she parted them with her tongue and sampled the intoxicating spice of his taste. The feel of his hands, warm through the thin shirt, running down her back to cup her ass took the embrace from sweet tenderness to raging passion in the blink of an eye. Desire for him spiraled higher, tighter, pushing away thoughts of the past and the future. Thrusting, rubbing, their tongues danced in a rhythm as old as time. She burned with need for him, her body throbbing to feel his bare skin pressed against her own.

Did he know what his kisses did to her? How they made her body yearn to move, eager to dance to a tune only he could make it sing? Her need was harmony to the melody his own body hummed. Her breath hitched when he pulled away from the kiss.

He laughed, a ragged sound of surprise that echoed what she was feeling. “I think we better get out of here before we embarrass ourselves. Come upstairs with me and have a drink?”

Nuzzling closer, she inhaled his achingly familiar scent. For a second she felt a stab of fear, as if she stood on a dangerous precipice with a drop to certain death gaping before her. Firmly, she pushed aside any doubts and reminded herself why she’d come.

Her stomach was tight with what she told herself was nothing more than desire. She blew out what was meant to be a calming breath and gave him her best sultry smile, the one she’d perfected for the red-carpet walks and photo shoots. “A drink sounds nice. Upstairs sounds better.”

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Chapter Four

Tara paused at the threshold to his home. She'd been quiet as he led her up the stairs, her hand held firmly in his. Duncan wondered if she was remembering the last time she'd been up here, or thinking of the night ahead.

He wanted her focused on now, not lost in old memories. Determined to fill her thoughts with pleasure before they braved the treacherous waters of the past, he used their joined hands to tug her gently through the open doorway and into his arms. She came willingly, although shadows still lingered in her eyes.

"Can I get you something?" He'd invited her up for a drink, after all. No need to go caveman on her now that he had her here. With one foot, he nudged the open door until he heard the latch catch and lock behind him.

"I think I've had enough to drink for the night. I've got a full day of rehearsals and interviews tomorrow." She gazed up at him through the veil of thick lashes that framed her eyes. "And I've got to be honest. I didn't come here tonight for the drinks."

Blood pooled in his groin and his heart began to pound faster. "You didn't?"

"I didn't." She moved closer. Her breasts pressed against him, the full curves tempting him to touch. Instead he reached for her cap, releasing the pins that had held it in place before pulling it off and freeing the waves of hair beneath. The strands gleamed like warmed honey, brushing his fingers as they fell into a sexy frame around her face and down her back. He couldn't wait to see them spread across his pillow.

“Maybe you came up for the view?” He forced a lighter note into his teasing whisper, hoping it didn’t sound like a desperate growl to her ears. He angled her slightly towards the windows to see the flashy holiday lights of the French Quarter visible through the glass that filled the east wall.

“Not for the view.” After an appreciative glance, she turned back to him, an answering smile playing at the corners of her lips.

As soon as he focused on her mouth any thought beyond having her was gone. Cupping her face in his hands, he whispered a silent “thank you” to whatever fate had brought her home. Then his mouth came down on hers, his tongue thrusting between her lips to plunder her sweet depths.

He wedged a hand between them, needing to feel her skin against his. Impatiently, he worked open the pearly buttons that ran down the front of her vest. They slid through the holes with gratifying ease. When the last one popped open he drew back to slide the fabric from her body, tossing the handful of fabric to the floor. She’d gone without a bra tonight, leaving nothing between her skin and his touch.

“God, your breasts are gorgeous. Just as I remembered them. Do they still taste as sweet?”

Duncan sank to his knees in front of her, enjoying the flare of surprised uncertainty in her eyes. Her skin was porcelain perfect, a creamy expanse that beckoned his mouth. Tracing a finger along the denim that marked the border between naked and clothed, he anticipated the moment he would have her completely bare before him.

Her dusky nipples beaded as he stroked the skin of her waist. In her heels she was tall enough that they were just out of reach to his lips. He feathered kisses across her stomach instead, tracing her navel and the sensitive skin over her ribs with long rasps of his tongue. A sound of

pleasure hummed in her throat and her hands came to rest on his shoulders while she watched to see what he would do next.

Sliding his hands slowly down her legs, Duncan stroked the lean muscles that filled his palms. He grinned in satisfaction when her legs began to quiver, even as he found the zippers tucked away in the inner seams of her boots. The rasp of metal on metal slid through the room as he unzipped them.

“Step out, baby.” Wordlessly, she obeyed, using her hands on his shoulders to keep her balance and putting her lush, curved mounds within reach.

“You’re looking a bit overdressed here, you know.” When he tore his gaze from the breasts that were suddenly right in front of his eyes the saucy grin was back on her face. The simple act of tilting his head back put one tempting bud only inches away from his lips.

“I am?” His mind had gone blank, every thought wiped clean beyond touching her, tasting her.

He leaned over, breathing on her nipple. It stiffened, echoing a sensual shiver from Tara in response. He brushed the other peak with one fingertip and then cupped the fullness in his palm.

Unable to wait any longer, he moved his lips to one breast. Her nipples had formed thrusting peaks under his touch, their sensitive tips begging him to taste. Sucking one firmly into his mouth, he ran his tongue across the flesh, leaving a wet trail where his lips had been. Her breath caught and he rewarded her by drawing the tip through his teeth.

She moaned, arching her chest forward in a pleading gesture for more. He pinched the other nipple and her hands clenched his shirt. Glancing up, he saw her eyes were closed, an expression of bliss on her face.

“Don’t stop.” Her voice had gone husky, the teasing wiped away.

He switched to the other side, leaving a damp line on her skin as he licked his way across her chest. “God, I love the way you taste. And your tits. So perfect in my hand. In my mouth.” He sucked the nipple between his lips, gently at first, then harder, drawing her into his mouth.

“Duncan.” His name exploded from her, a cry full of need and longing. The desire he’d kept banked raced to the surface and crashed through his control, demanded to be appeased.

Impatiently, he fumbled at her zipper, somehow managing to get the snap and zipper open enough that he could slide his hands beneath the fabric. Her hips moved restlessly at his touch. Cupping her silk-covered ass in his palms, he pressed a lingering kiss to each nipple. Then he hooked his thumbs into the fabric and helped as she shimmied out of her jeans and panties.

The flash of hairless pink flesh and the scent of her arousal froze him in place. Seeing her naked, shaved pussy had his cock aching to be buried in her wetness. Without thought, he leaned into her, licking the smooth skin of her hip, tracing the crease where her leg and body met.

Her hands were clenched in his hair now, urging him on. Excitement slid down his spine and his balls tightened in anticipation. Just the scent of her was driving him crazy. Encouraging her thighs further apart with his hands, he focused on pleasuring her.

He nuzzled the folds of her flesh with his tongue and lips and was rewarded with a deep, throaty moan. Duncan fought the urge to bury his cock in her heat, instead thrusting his tongue into her dampness, then drawing it in a firm, steady line up to her clit.

“So delicious. So hot.” He murmured the words into her, needing to share just how much he loved this. The taste of her sweet honey filled his

mouth. Licking her folds, he focused on the sensitive nub of flesh when she began to rock her hips against him and whimper his name.

“Duncan. Duncan. Please.” Her words trailed off to sexy little whimpers that drove him on. Beneath his hands, he felt the muscles of her belly quiver. Softly, he sucked her clit into his mouth, whipping his tongue back and forth over the bundle of nerves.

Her body was claimed by her climax, tensing and shaking as the pleasure swept through. Duncan held her as she came, keeping his face pressed to her flesh and feeding from the sweetness of her as she rode the waves of her orgasm. When she gave a shaky sigh he pulled back to look up at her.

“Now I think you were about to tell me what you came up here for?”

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Chapter Five

Tara shuddered, dazed by the aftershocks from their carnal pleasure. It had been too much. It wasn't nearly enough. Her body ached for more.

Her head was spinning with thoughts of all the things she wanted to do to Duncan. Strip him naked, coax him into lying spread-eagle on the bed and run her mouth over every inch of his flesh until he begged for mercy. Fill her hands with the hair-roughened skin of his thighs while she crawled over his hard male body. Kiss him senseless and fuck him until he would never be able to forget her.

Longing surged through her, along with determination. "I came up here to have my wicked way with you tonight, Duncan Rousse. Unless you have any objections to those plans?"

"Objections? *Chère*, I'll be your most willing victim." He grinned up at her, his face full of bad-boy charm and slightly pink from being pressed against her skin.

God, she loved it when he called her that. It sent the most delicious shivers through her veins and made her heart beat funny in response.

"Then you need to do exactly what I tell you. To start, why don't you come up here and help me get you naked." He rose to his feet, the movements full of lithe grace, and brushed her lips with his own. She melted against him for a moment, savoring the taste of herself on his mouth, the brush of his cool shirt against her heated skin.

"Take off your shirt." Nudging him backwards a step, she watched as he obeyed with gratifying deftness. He stopped when his shirt was gone, waiting for her next command. Tara wondered just how long he'd let her give the orders before he took charge. Duncan had always been in control

during the weeks they had been lovers, from their very first kiss until the last time they'd made love. She'd basked in his dominance then, welcoming the chance to show him how much she'd loved him. But she'd done a bit of growing up since she'd left. Was it possible her lack of self-confidence then had played a part in pulling them apart?

She pushed the thought away and smiled, enjoying his willing trust. Having Duncan following her directions was a welcome change, and one she planned to take full advantage of.

"Keep your hands by your side for now." Tara looked her fill, enjoying the way his nipples tightened as she took her time studying his smooth chest. His stomach was as flat as ever, all hard skin and firm muscles. The thin line of dark hair that trailed from his abdomen into his pants had her tongue itching to trace it to its destination.

She licked her lips and grinned when she saw his hands clench in response. In one quick step she moved against him, rubbing her bare breasts into his chest. She fought the impulse to strip him naked and straddle his hips, to ride him against the wall.

Skimming her hands up his arms and across his shoulders, she watched his eyes darken with anticipation. But his hands didn't move from his side. She tongued the hollow in his throat then licked lower, briefly sucking one pebbled nipple into her mouth then the other. She breathed in deeply, holding in the scent of musk and soap that lingered on his skin.

"Duncan." Tara planted a short but thorough kiss on him that left them both gasping for more. She took a step backwards. "Take your pants off."

Seconds later his pants and boxers were pooled around his ankles on the floor. Tara let it slide that he'd taken off more than told, distracted by the sight of his cock. Oh, sweet heavens, the man was built to please a woman.

She didn't know how much longer she would be able to wait to feel him inside her, every delicious inch of him plunging into her wetness.

She knew she was staring, felt the seconds ticking away, but was enjoying the moment too much to care. It took his strained chuckle to draw her gaze back to his.

“If you keep staring at me like that I won't be responsible for my actions, *chère*.”

“Staring at you like what?”

“Like a woman who's been denied chocolate and was just handed the keys to the candy store.”

“It's not chocolate I plan on putting in my mouth tonight.” She traced her hand down his chest, stopping when her fingers hovered just above his swollen cock. “I want to lick, suck, taste, enjoy every inch of you. And then when I'm done, I want to ride you until you can't take anymore. And that's just for starters.”

A strangled moan was his only answer.

Standing on her toes placed her lips level with his ear. She licked the outer rim and gave a gentle nip to the tip before whispering, “I want you on the bed now.”

“How lucky for me—that's just where I want to be.” Duncan toed off his shoes and stepped free of his clothes, then took her hand in his and led her down the dimly lit hallway.

His bedroom hadn't changed much since she'd last been here. The large platform bed still dominated the room, although the cinnamon-hued coverlet and linens were new. Hopefully the scarred nightstand still held a box of condoms, since she'd left her pants in the other room. She quickly lost interest in the decor and focused on the reason she was here.

Duncan. All six foot plus of him, completely naked and waiting for direction.

“Lie down on your back and put your hands up over your head.”

“You seem to really enjoy being in charge.” He didn’t appear to be bothered by it, moving to the center of the bed and following her directions without complaint.

“Do you mind?”

“*Ca c’est bon!* It’s turning me on. Almost as much as thinking about what I’m going to do to you later when I’m back in control.” His voice was almost a growl, and she enjoyed the hint of menace that sent a wicked shiver down her spine.

“Be a good boy and maybe I’ll let you be in charge next time.” Crawling up between his loosely parted legs, Tara made a space for herself on the bed. Not quite touching him, but close enough to feel the heat from his body wrap her in its embrace. She studied the man spread out and waiting for her pleasure and wondered again just how much longer he would be able to let her have the lead.

His thighs were tense, the muscles tight as he waited for the touch of her hands. The thick length of his cock jutted from his groin, the swollen head already damp from his pleasure. His chest rose and fell with each breath, and in his throat she could see the rapid pulse of his heartbeat.

His eyes were dilated with arousal, his cheeks flushed. But his hands remained clenched above his head and he managed to keep his cocky grin in place.

She decided it was her mission to wipe that smirk off his face.

“You are one beautiful man, Duncan. And I’ve been thinking about doing this for a long time now.”

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Chapter Six

Tara leaned forward, delicately running her hands up his thighs. Duncan clenched his hands together tighter, fighting the urge to pull her body down across his own. He wasn't quite sure what the stakes were here, but he wasn't one to walk away once the game was in play. Watching how much it had excited her to be in charge was its own turn-on.

He lost the ability to think when her hands reached his hipbones and she bent down, feathering a kiss over his lower stomach. Her cheek brushed his cock in a satiny caress as she kissed her way across his groin. An eternity could have passed and he wouldn't have known. He was caught up in the feel of her lips on his flesh.

The whisper of her hair as it trailed across his skin was sweet torture. His cock strained towards her, pleading for her attention. Instead she followed the sensitive skin of his pelvis upwards, her tongue tickling damply around his navel. His muscles clenched at the teasing caress.

With a last nip to the taut flesh of his stomach, she moved lower. Glancing up, she caught Duncan's gaze and shot him a saucy grin. "You're being very quiet. You doing all right?"

He barely recognized the strangled groan that came from his throat. But it seemed to be all she needed to hear. Keeping her eyes locked to his, she lowered her mouth, rubbing the head of his cock along her lower lip, dampening the lush pillow of flesh with his precome. When her tongue slid out to lap up the moisture he almost lost the battle to stay still.

Her purred murmur of approval sent a rush of heat through his veins. Then her mouth opened wider and she sucked the head of his cock into her mouth. A tingle spread from his spine to his balls, and he had to clench his

teeth together to keep from arching his hips and thrusting further into her hot, wet mouth. His patience was rewarded when she began to suck firmly, drawing him in deeper.

Had her mouth been this sweet before? Had she ever brought him to the edge of control with just a few touches, a few licks of that tempting tongue? He'd thought he remembered every touch they had ever shared, every moment he'd spent loving her curvy body. But nothing in his memories could come close to the reality of having her in his bed now.

Ah, hell, he wasn't going to last much longer if she kept this up.

Tara pulled back a bit, far enough to rasp her tongue up and down the sensitive skin. She sucked harder when she swallowed him next, her head pushing forward to swallow him deep, and instinctively his hips flexed off the bed, craving more.

Her hands joined in his torment. One circled the bottom of his cock, stroking upwards then back along with her mouth until every inch was being pleased. She cupped his testicles with her other hand, rubbing them across the softness of her palm.

Duncan gritted his teeth, determined to hold out as long as possible. Gradually, she sped the pace, and with each stroke her sucks became a whisper firmer. Her cheeks hollowed with each upstroke, and a ribbon of moisture ran from her mouth down his cock. The stiffened tip of her tongue grazed the sensitive nerves beneath the head with each passing. His balls tightened and the tingling grew, buzzing as though he'd put his finger in a hot socket. Just as his control reached the limit she eased away, placing a line of soft kisses on the dark vein that ran along the underside, then rising to her hands and knees over him.

"Are there still condoms in the nightstand?" Her eyes shone with purpose, and the skin around her sultry mouth had turned pink from her

efforts. Her lips were red and puffy.

“Yeah. I’ll get—”

“Don’t move.” Shooting him a warning look from beneath her lashes, she slid up his chest, rubbing every generous curve of her body against him on the way.

She was killing him. He twisted his head to watch her open the drawer and pull out a condom. Then she was slithering her way back down his body. Her pussy pressed against his cock, trapping it against his stomach and surrounding him with her temptingly wet heat. Teasing him with what he was growing desperate to have.

“You’ve become a wicked woman, Tara.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.” She was toying with the condom package, softly trailing it down her throat to her chest as if unaware what she was doing. But she knew. That half-quirk in the corner of her mouth told him she knew.

“I love wicked. I can be a bit wicked myself, if you’d let me show you.”

“Not yet. I’m not quite finished with what I’ve started here. You wouldn’t want me to leave off without finishing the job.”

“God, no.” He tensed in anticipation when she moved, enjoying the damp slide of her pussy as she straddled his thighs.

“You’re so hard.” She whispered the words as she unwrapped the condom and tossed aside the wrapper.

Duncan couldn’t hold back the hiss of anticipation when the latex touched his flesh. He watched her face as she slid it down his shaft, loving the way her nostrils flared in excitement.

His whole body ached with need. She scooted up until her heels were by his hips, putting her bare pussy right over his cock. The sight of her pale

pink skin poised over his, ready to open for his thrusts, had him swallowing hard.

Tara leaned into him, her hands going to his chest. Bracing herself against him she rose, rubbing her drenched folds against his cock until the head found her core. Then his cock slid tightly inside her, surrounded by her hot, clenching flesh. Inch by inch, she took him in, her gaze locked on his.

Duncan thought he'd found heaven when she finally began to move. The sensual tug of her pussy as she drew away and then welcomed him back in became as important as the air he breathed. He thrust his pelvis up on the next downstroke, wringing a sweet cry from Tara as her clit rubbed against him.

"You feel so damn good." He choked out the words, wishing he could tell her just how good. Hoping she felt the same.

No longer able to keep his hands away, he drew them from overhead and wrapped them around her waist. "I have to touch you now."

"Then put your mouth on me. Please, Duncan."

He leaned forward, licking her nipples until they were again wet, hard and flushed. Pulling one into his mouth, he began sucking, nipping and pleasuring the sensitive nub. Her pussy clenched around him as her body signaled its approval.

Tara curved her back when he sucked harder, throwing her head back and letting out another sexy cry. The sweetly incoherent sounds were pulling him closer to climax, and he could feel it racing to meet him.

Her rhythm sped faster, her hips angling so that each stroke rubbed her clit against him. She ground against him, her body pleading for release.

"Fly for me now, Tara. Let it go."

She cried out her answer, plunging her hips up and down ever faster as he held her waist tightly. He slid one hand down, letting his thumb rest

against her clit, and began stroking it in time with her thrusts. Her climax swept through her and she exploded with pleasure, her body tensing and a scream tearing from her throat.

Her pussy clamped on his cock with a growing pressure that pulled his own climax from him. Digging his heels into the bed, he drove upwards, crying out her name as he found his release.

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Chapter Seven

Tara collapsed on his chest, every muscle limp with satisfaction. For several long moments her brain was quiet, too drunk on the afterglow to cause trouble with questions she didn't want to answer. Her lips still stung from his kisses, and her body had the delicious ache from being well loved. But just as Duncan's hand began rubbing slow, tingly circles across her shoulder, her inner voice woke up.

That didn't solve anything. You idiot, you're still in love with him. If anything you love him more now than you did before. What kind of half-brained idea was this? And what are you going to do now?

Burying her face against his deliciously sweaty neck, she tried to hide from herself. That voice in her head wasn't going to let her off that easy.

Why did you think this was going to get him out of your mind? Now every Duncan dream is going to be full of new details, based on fresh reality, and not the memories of something that happened five years ago. And this reality was pretty damn hot, if you didn't notice.

Taking a deep breath, she raised her head to meet his gaze. One large hand was pillowed under his head, tilting his head down so he could see her. Study her.

Immediately, she pulled her public face on, the smiling one that hid every true thought and emotion from anyone who would be watching.

"That was amazing." She followed her words with a wet kiss below his ear, then snuggled back down into his warmth. Maybe if she stayed very still for a few minutes she'd be able to think of a way to get out of here without losing her pride, along with whatever self-respect she had left.

“Why do you do that?” His voice had gone serious and his hand had stopped moving.

“What?” She closed her eyes, wishing he’d go back to the playful Duncan that had led her into his rooms tonight.

“Hide.”

“Why do you think I’m hiding?” Just because she couldn’t look him in the eye while she asked him didn’t mean she was hiding, did it?

“Maybe it’s the fake smile you just plastered on your face. Or it could be the way you don’t want to look me in the eye. What happened? I thought we were having a pretty damn great reunion here—I know you were there with me right up to the end. Talk to me, Tara. Tell me what’s running through that confused mind of yours.”

“It’s just that—” Sighing, Tara pushed herself up on her elbows. She owed him an honest answer to his question. “I didn’t expect this to happen, not like this.”

“Which this? You didn’t expect to end up in my bed? Maybe I read the signals wrong, because I could have sworn I heard you tell me that this was where you wanted to be.”

“It was! It is. And it was—you were—incredible.” She stumbled to a stop, knowing she was making a mess of this but having no idea how to make it any better.

“Having regrets?” His eyes stayed on hers, weighing her reaction.

“No. Not a single one.”

“That makes two of us. So what’s upsetting you? What are you trying so hard not to say?”

That I still love you. The words sat on the tip of her tongue, leaving a bitter taste behind when she swallowed them back. “I’m not the same person I was before, Duncan. Five years changes people. I guess you’ve

changed more than a bit too. And I thought that we'd get together, have some good times and then I'd be able to bury the past and say goodbye when I head back home."

"So this was supposed to be a one-time thing? A for-old-times'-sake fuck?" Every muscle in his body lost its looseness, tightening like an army of coiled springs. There was an edge to his voice now that said "danger".

"No! It wasn't—it isn't like that. Damn it, I don't know what I thought it would be. I couldn't come home without seeing you again, and as soon as I saw you and I knew the sparks were still there, I guess this was something that had to happen. But it wasn't supposed to make me care for you again. And it sure as hell wasn't supposed to make me wish I didn't have to get on that plane in a little more than 24 hours."

His lips were hot against hers, full of emotions that she didn't want to put into words. Rolling her until she was under him, he consumed her with a kiss as full of need and desire as though they hadn't just burned up the sheets a few minutes ago. She felt his shaft hardening against her thigh, and the answering quivers deep in her gut as her body anticipated being claimed by his.

"Then don't get on it." He whispered the words, looking as sincere as she'd ever seen him.

Shocked speechless, Tara felt the sweetness of his words slide through the cracks around her heart. She could only kiss him back, trying to pour her hopes and doubts into the stroke of tongue on tongue. She breathed in the air he'd breathed, wishing that she could pause time and just live in this moment forever.

She couldn't stop the way her body pressed into his, craving the feel of his hands and flesh stroking her higher. The muscles of his back were hard

under her hands, flexing when her fingers curled into his skin. The sensations tearing through her were urgent, insistent.

Heat sizzled across her as sexual energy flared between them. She needed him again, yearned to stop the doubt-filled thoughts that were crowding her head. “Fuck me, Duncan. I need you now.”

His broad shoulders flexed as he shifted over her, stretching to reach the drawer beside the bed. Foil crinkled in his palm as he pushed up to kneel over her. She watched as he sheathed the heavily engorged length of his cock, rolling the snug latex over his flesh.

Then he was filling her, her pussy stretched tight with pleasure-pain as he sank into her with one hard thrust. “Tara,” he growled, sliding his hands into her hair, turning his face into her neck. He held himself tensely still for a moment as though afraid to move. “Okay?”

She pressed frantic kisses against him, wrapping her legs around his hips and urging him to move. “More than okay.” Then words were gone, and there was nothing but the craving for more movement, more skin against skin, more Duncan.

Her body arched as he began to move. His first strokes were smooth, disciplined, his hips pulling back and easing forward while his cock slid through her tight, clenching passage. It wasn't enough.

“More, Duncan. Please. I need more.” She dug her heels into his ass, forcing him deeper, harder. She craved the mind-wiping haze of orgasm, pushed him faster as she strained to reach it. A steady stream of whimpers and moans filled the room, and distantly she realized they were coming from her.

His hands clenched into hard fists on the bed beside her. Carnal ecstasy filled her when he surged relentlessly into her, setting up a fast, pounding rhythm. His thrusts became deep, almost violent, stretching her to the limit,

and her body still wanted more. Tara twisted against him, gasping for breath, tormented by the razor-sharp hunger that was clawing through her womb.

“Tara. *Chéri doux.*” Duncan gasped out the words as he bowed his head to the pillows, his body given over to the delicious pounding of his flesh into hers. Driving faster with each stroke, his urgency triggered her climax. Her body clenched around him, then quaked as her orgasm slammed into her, ripping through her aching heart, flaying her wounded soul until nothing was left but the honesty of the moment.

“*Ma petite chatte.*” One final deep thrust and he stiffened, then hard shudders shook his torso as his own fierce climax claimed him. She heard his guttural groan as he found release.

She could still feel echoes of pleasure running through her. Duncan held her close as their breaths became even. Spent, she lay quietly in his arms, letting her eyes slide closed as she escaped into sleep.

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Chapter Eight

Tara was just as confused when she woke in the morning as she'd been the night before. She lay in the grey predawn light, watching Duncan sleep as the shadows grew shorter. He looked younger when he slept, more relaxed. More like the Duncan she'd fallen in love with five years before.

Her confusion mingled with her memories of the past, fresh from yet another dream where she had relived the night Duncan had told her that they were finished. It seemed even sleeping in his arms wasn't enough to keep the dream away. How many times, she wondered, would she have to relive this before she could really put the past to rest?

Every word he'd said to her that night was as clear in her head now as though it had happened yesterday. Silently she lay there, unwillingly reliving the painful memory once again.

Five years earlier

Tara burst into Duncan's office, the fax that the Brick Lady's day manager had just handed her clenched tightly in one hand. She gasped for breath, afraid that if she let the paper go it might disappear, like a dream that would fade after waking. The sender's name was barely legible above her shaking fingers—Thomas Allan, Executive Producer.

Thomas Allan. He was one of the hottest producers of the decade and the winner of more recording-industry awards than she could list on both hands, including back-to-back Grammys for Album of the Year.

She still couldn't believe it, even after reading the fax a dozen times. This was her chance at something big, something real. "Oh God, Duncan.

You have to read this!” She flew across the room and launched herself at him, trusting him to catch her before they hit the ground.

“Whoa, baby. Slow down. Are you okay?” He held her firmly, giving her a tender hug before he set her on her feet.

“Not just okay. Duncan, he was serious! Thomas Allan. He wasn’t just bullshitting me.”

“What happened?” She missed his warmth when he stepped behind his desk and picked up some papers, putting a few feet of space between them.

“Remember you introduced me to him last week after the show? He was on vacation and stopped in here with your brother.” In her excitement the words were bubbling out faster than champagne from a freshly popped bottle, but she couldn’t have slowed down if she tried. The producer had said some nice things to her about her set, telling her he was glad he’d stopped in for a drink and had a chance to hear her. Casually, he’d mentioned getting in touch with her when he got back to the West Coast, flattering words she had not dared hope he would follow through on.

Unable to stand still, she danced excitedly around the room, waving the papers in her hand with a flourish. “It was last Saturday I think, because we had a full house with college kids celebrating after the football game.”

“I remember. He’s a friend of Stephen’s from college. Good enough guy, for a music-industry type.”

“He wants to fly me to LA. Duncan, he wants me to record a demo in his studio!” Her body still humming with energy, she threw her arms around his neck and spun him in a wild circle.

“That is fantastic. I’m so proud of you, *chère*. You’re going to knock them off their feet in LA once they hear you sing.” His arms clenched tightly around her, squeezing the air from her lungs until she gave a gasping laugh. His hands lingered on her waist before he let her go.

“I didn’t really think I’d hear from him. He said when he left that he’d be in touch, but I thought he was just being polite. But he wasn’t! I mean, he was polite too. But he meant it. Oh here, just read this.” Tara thrust the papers into his hands, then did another nervous twirl around the room while he read them.

“They want you out there soon. He says he can get you time in the studio in three days if you can get things settled here in time.” After carefully reading the papers, he set them on his desk, then turned and sent her a look so full of tenderness she thought she might cry. “We’re going to miss you, Tara. I hope you think of us when you get a chance.”

“Miss me? You’ll hardly have time to even notice I’m gone. I’ll be back after a few days, maybe a week. It’s just a demo, no one’s offering me a job out there.” She grinned at the idea.

“Not yet. But, baby, you’ve got a whole world waiting for you out there. Thomas wouldn’t be flying you out there if he didn’t think you had something special. Hell, I know you have it. You’re going to work your butt off out there just like you have here, and you’re going to be a star. You won’t have time to be flying back and forth.” His voice was gentle, almost husky. Why did it send a shiver of unease down her spine?

“Maybe. I don’t know. Thomas did mention in there that he could help me find a place to stay. But New Orleans is home. You’re here, my friends in the band are here, my whole world is right here. I’m just going to fly out there for a few days, see how things go and then I’ll be back. I can’t wait to tell you all about it.”

“Tara.” His voice had gone flat, as if he were delivering a bit of unpleasant news. “This is your shot, *chère*. You need to grab it with both hands and not look back while you climb to the top. Your friends will understand. There’s no reason for you to come back here. You’re lucky to

get one chance like this in a lifetime. You need to jump at it while it's there."

"But what about us? What about you?" The excited butterflies in her stomach had all stopped beating at once, leaving behind a heavy cloud of dread.

His smile faded to something more bitter than sweet. "What we had was wonderful. But, Tara, it never would have lasted. It never does. Maybe it's better that we end it while we still have that fire, instead of dragging this out until the passion fades to nothing. I'd rather we part now as friends than have you hoping for something that can't ever be."

"You're breaking up with me." Her voice cracked, the words fragmenting. Much like her heart. She swallowed hard. "Without even giving us a chance, you're saying it's over. You're kicking me out now when I need a friend the most?" She'd flown right past angry, falling face first into shattered.

"I'm not kicking you out. You'll always be welcome at The Brick Lady."

She flinched as his words sank in. It hurt hearing him dismiss what they'd had, what she'd thought was so special. His casual reassurance that she was always welcome at the club was salt in the wound. Welcome in the club, just not in his bed, in his life. She was in love with him and he was saying goodbye.

Tara gathered what was left of her pride, wrapping it around her heart like a banner. She grabbed her papers off his desk and shot him one final look of pained disbelief. How had what was supposed to be one of the happiest days of her life gone to hell so quickly?

"Tell Stephen thank you for me. And say goodbye to..." She choked on the words before she could get them out. She sucked in a deep breath,

willing herself to hold it together until she could get out of here. Eventually, she forced the words past trembling lips. “Tell everyone goodbye.”

“I will.” He’d turned his face towards the windows, evidently already wishing she had gone. Tears burned at the back of her eyes but she held them in.

“I love you, you know. Damn you for only thinking about how easy you could make this on yourself instead of giving us a chance.”

She left him standing there, his shoulders tight and hands thrust deep in his pockets. He didn’t even say goodbye.

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Chapter Nine

Duncan was alone when he woke. He clenched his hand on the crumpled sheet beside him, still warm from the body he had hoped to find pressed against his. A moment later he heard the shower turn on in the bathroom and he sighed with relief that she was still there.

He'd thought for a moment Tara had gone, that she had slipped out before he could ask her if he could see her tonight. Hell, he hadn't even asked her where she was staying. She'd mentioned her day would be full getting ready for the show tonight, and he could feel the little time they had left slipping through his grasping fingers.

He didn't want her to leave but didn't have the right to ask her to stay. She'd found all the success he'd wished for her and more, become the star he'd known she could be. It was all about talent and connections for a singer, and she wouldn't have made all the connections she needed to make it to the top just singing in a small club in the French Quarter.

It had all but killed him five years ago to end their relationship, even when he'd known it was the only way he would convince her to go. Her love had been the sweetest gift he'd ever been given, and the one thing he couldn't keep. He hadn't slept right for months, throwing himself back into the endless rounds of parties and friends he'd begun to separate himself from while Tara was in his life. He had escaped the pain by burying his misery behind a bottle, and too many nights had ended with him drinking himself into oblivion.

It never got any easier to face the days, although he'd accepted after one too many rough mornings that drinking wasn't the answer.

He didn't know if there was an answer. His brother Stephen had become concerned about him after stories of Duncan's renewed party life hit the gossip pages. Stephen had spent more than one night trying in vain to convince Duncan to go after Tara. The talks hadn't changed Duncan's mind, but they'd gone a long way to helping him find peace with his decision.

When he'd realized he couldn't drink away his memories, he'd found that pouring himself into work had helped. Over the past few years he'd bought half a dozen clubs on the East Coast, putting his energy into expanding the new entertainment arm of the Rouse business. But working eighteen-hour days hadn't made it any easier for him to stop thinking of Tara.

Tired of brooding, he threw the covers aside and headed for the bathroom. Tara would have to leave again soon enough without him obsessing over it. He wanted to make sure that this time she had a reason to come back.

Tara leaned against the cool shower tiles, waiting for the water to wash away the fog from a largely sleepless night. She'd wanted nothing more than to curl up in Duncan's arms and spend the day naked in his bed. But she had a phone interview in less than an hour, followed with morning rehearsals, two late-morning TV interviews, an afternoon set walk-through and a show tonight. She felt tired just thinking about it. There was no room on her schedule for lazy days in bed.

Her head was finally clearing when the shower door slid open and a deliciously naked Duncan slid through the opening.

"Good morning, beautiful."

"Mmm." She sank into his morning kiss, savoring the mingled flavors of Duncan and peppermint toothpaste.

“Mind if I join you?”

“As long as you’ll wash my back.” She passed him the soap and turned to face the showerhead in the corner.

“Just your back?” He nuzzled the sweet spot where her neck and shoulders came together, and ran his tongue across the suddenly sensitive nerves. He licked a hot trail across her throat, focusing on the pulse that was pounding beneath the thin skin.

Tara braced her hands on the tile in front of her to make up for the trembling that had set up in her knees. “Maybe my arms?” Her voice came out husky.

Soap-slicked hands stroked down her back, then up. His body was hot and hard behind her. He moved closer, until she could lean back into his strength, feel his cock throbbing against her back. Sliding his hands down her arms, he carefully washed every inch of skin, every crevice where finger met finger and hand met wrist. He skimmed slippery palms back up her arms and down her chest, stroking her sensitive breasts, thumbing her pinkened nipples.

“Keep your hands on the wall, baby. I want to taste your sweetness.” He slid his leg between her thighs, prodding them gently until she slid them willingly apart. Then he was kneeling behind her, his hands cupping her ass as his tongue traced the wet cleft of her buttocks.

Tara threw her head back, welcoming the warm water spraying her face. She let control slip away, moving her body where Duncan’s hands directed, allowing him to angle her for his pleasure. He picked up one foot and placed it on the shallow seat molded into the side of the shower stall. Her skin felt hot. The familiar need flowed through her when his mouth pressed lower.

The first swipe of his tongue against the sensitive slit of her pussy drew a gasp from her. She could feel her body come alive under his caress, her nipples aching, her pussy clenching, her clit throbbing. He groaned against her flesh, shredding her control with the verbal caress. Thick juice leaked from between her thighs, and was washed away by the water running down her legs.

He pulled on her hips, canting them back until he had her ass tilted higher, her pussy exposed. The hands around her hips clenched tighter, holding her still. A moment later, he covered her swollen, pulsing cunt with his mouth, thrusting his tongue inside her core.

Waves of need coursed through Tara as he licked a molten path to her clit and back. Gentle licks, followed by firmer strokes, pushed her higher. He was driving her to a heat she wasn't sure she could survive. A finger, then two slid, into her pussy, and she thrust her hips downward convulsively. He possessed her until every naked inch of her body was sensitized to his touch. A strangled scream ripped free of her throat when he stroked her clit with his thumb.

Soon she couldn't scream, couldn't even moan, as the breath was torn from her lungs. It was too much pleasure, too much sensation for her to hold off her release. She exploded against him, her body quaking as the orgasm claimed her.

When the tremors had faded he pulled away to stand. "Wrap your legs around me, Tara. I need to have you now."

She turned, placing her back to the corner, and held his gaze while he gripped her thighs and lifted her against the walls. The swollen head of his cock was pressed snug against her pussy. She whimpered and arched into him, welcoming the pressure as her sensitive tissues slowly parted to let him slide in.

He tensed when she sheathed his flesh within her core. “*Maudit*. I didn’t grab a condom.”

Tara studied his face and saw nothing there but concern and frustration. “I’m clean. I haven’t had time for a social life in... Well, a long damn time. And I’m still on the pill.”

“I’ve always worn one. But we can stop now and I’ll go...”

“No.” She clenched him with her inner muscles, as if she could hold him there with her grip. His jaw clenched at the intimate caress. “It’s okay. I want you like this, nothing between your flesh and mine. Just stay.”

“Then ride me, *chère*. Ride me now.”

She began to move. Slowly at first, barely rocking her pelvis forward to bump his abdomen with her own. As his shaft rubbed against already-sensitive tissue, she picked up speed, losing herself in the swirl of emotions that held her heart.

With her legs wrapped around him, Tara grasped his shoulders, pulling herself higher and then dropping down on his cock.

“Do that again,” he gasped. Pleasure sparked in her gut and she repeated the motion.

His firm hands came up to cup her ass and he began lifting her higher, encouraging her to move over him faster. She writhed in his arms, caught in the carnal hunger that was gripping them. Liquid heat began to pool in her core, swelling until she couldn’t hold back the tide.

She groaned, riding him faster as the climax reached out to suck her in. “Come with me, Duncan. Now, baby, now, now.” Her voice rose as she chanted the words, needing him to be with her when she found release.

He lowered his head, his lips covering hers and his tongue plunging inside, licking, tasting, devouring. The explosion that had been gathering

rocked through her body, lashed higher when she felt him tense around her, thrust harder and deeper. His release pushed her over the edge.

Her second orgasm shattered her. There was no respite from the emotions that unraveled inside her, overwhelming her with hope and need, ecstasy and fear.

She closed her eyes, burying her head in his shoulder as their racing hearts began to calm, and holding back the tears that tried to slip free.

Leaving Duncan the first time had broken her heart. This time there might not be anything left to heal.

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Chapter Ten

Duncan kept himself busy behind the bar, stocking the coolers and washing glasses. Every few seconds he caught himself watching the door, waiting for Tara to arrive. He'd been back from the concert for almost an hour and still wasn't sure what he was going to say to her.

The concert had been a sellout, helping raise a sizeable amount of money for the Artists Rebuild New Orleans fund. The all-access pass Tara had left for him at the Will-Call window allowed him access to the entire venue. He had loved seeing her behind the scenes before she'd gone onstage and then again after the final curtain call.

There'd been only a moment with her before the show, a brief but passionate kiss before he was shooed out of the way by her scowling agent and the harried stage manager. Duncan watched most of the show from the wings, riveted by the way she worked the stage. She was incredible. She'd had the crowd in her hands from the first song, molding them into a dancing, singing, enthusiastic throng that adored her more with every note she sang.

She brought the house down when she ended the final set with a promise to be back soon, then launched into a round of Christmas songs that had the whole crowd singing out the words along with her.

She'd been glowing after the show. There was no other word for it. Riding high on the energy from the performance, she'd thrown herself into his arms, kissing him with all the passion that had fueled her during the concert. When her agent finally pulled her away, Tara had pressed a hot kiss to his lips and promised she'd meet him back at the club as soon as she

could. He'd left her having a quiet argument with her agent, but even that disagreement hadn't wiped the smile of excitement off her face.

With the taste of her still on his lips, Duncan didn't mind doing grunt work. The menial jobs occupied his hands and kept him from needing to make small talk with the people who filled the club. Even on Christmas Eve the French Quarter was humming with people, some celebrating, some escaping a lonely or unhappy house. Having spent more than one lonely holiday himself, he could sympathize.

The work gave him time to think. Time to imagine what his days and nights were going to be like when she left for LA. To wonder if it was already too late to make his real Christmas wish come true.

His heart lurched when he finally saw her come through the door. Her hair was tucked under a cap again, a casual top and jeans replacing the costumes she'd performed in. She shot him a wink as she crossed to the bar. The stage makeup was gone, leaving her looking almost as young as she had when he'd first seen her on his stage. But she was still so full of energy she all but sparkled with it. His body tightened in his jeans in anticipation.

"Think the boss will notice if you disappear for the rest of the night?" Her voice was huskier than usual, still a bit raw from the show. A slow, sexy smile touched her lips.

"I have it on good authority that the boss won't mind a bit." Duncan ducked under the counter and took her hand, pulling her to him for a quick but thorough kiss. "Let's get out of here."

Once up the stairs with the door shut behind them she launched herself into his arms. "God, that was amazing. Having you there made it the best show ever." She pressed a hard kiss to his lips, delving inside and tangling her tongue with his.

It was a wild merging of mouths, all hunger and need and desperation. Her hands clutched the back of his head as if she'd hold him there forever, and he fed on her moans and gasps and tiny mewls of demand. Willingly, he poured himself into giving her what she showed him she wanted, plunging his tongue into her damp sweetness and devouring her with his kiss.

Duncan held her tightly, cherishing the heat of her body where it touched his. Would she be leaving in the morning, heading back to her life in California? Was tonight going to be the inevitable goodbye? The last time he held her, kissed her, made her his? It was hard to push the thoughts away.

He pressed his cock into her belly, trading kisses as she wiggled her way up until her legs wrapped around his hips. The heat from her core surrounded him when she settled over his erection, starting a delicious ache that fed his hunger. With a gasp, he pulled his mouth free and tucked her head under his chin, then strode quickly to the bedroom.

Restlessly, her hands plucked at his shirt, pulling it free so she could stroke the skin beneath. They fell to the bed in a tangle of clothes and limbs, groans and gasps.

She moaned, the hoarse whimper full of impatience as she tugged at his clothes. He nearly came in his pants when she brushed his cock with her hand as she tried to force the leather belt free from the buckle that held it. Thrusting into her hand, he growled his impatience with the clothes that separated them.

“*Mon Dieu.* You're going to burn me alive, *chère.*” He moved back enough to pull his shirt over his head, ignoring the sound of buttons flying as they popped free. He forced the unruly belt to behave, and carefully worked the zipper past his engorged flesh. His shoes hit the floor, followed seconds later by the rest of his clothes.

The soft, silky fabric of her top hugged her breasts, revealing the eagerly thrusting buds beneath. He slid his hand under the cloth, tracing the taut skin of her belly as he pushed the shirt up and bared her dark pink nipples to his gaze. She trembled at his touch.

Duncan watched her lips part, her tongue darting out to moisten the dry surface. His heart clenched at the expression on her face. Hunger, confusion, pain and tenderness all danced across her delicate features. Her eyes were glittering with conflicting needs and emotions.

“Tara, *bébé*. Tell me what you want.” A fierce need to please her filled him. There was nothing he wouldn’t promise her if it would make her happy again.

“Touch me.” Her voice was hoarse with longing. “Fill me. No condom, nothing between us. Make me yours.”

His heart kicked at her words. Her fingers gripped his cock, stroking and squeezing him in her hot grasp. His control began to fray as his balls throbbed with violent need, and he fought for breath as she tore a ragged groan from his throat with her wanton touch. How could she drive him to the edge so quickly?

He helped her to her knees and stripped her shirt over her head, then pushed her back down to worship her breasts, sucking one swollen tip into his mouth and capturing the other tightly beaded nipple between his fingers. Compressing, pulling, suckling and caressing, he focused on nothing but her pleasure until she lay shuddering beneath him.

Only then did he move down her body to slip off her jeans and panties. He needed her naked now, craved the feel of her bare body pressed to his own. She arched her hips off the bed to help, shifting her legs apart when the confining fabric was gone and offering him the deliciously bare folds of her moist pussy.

He had to fuck her. Had to feel her body embracing his, taking him in and making him whole. He fumbled for control, desperate not to rush when he finally had his cock pulsing at the entrance to her core. He wanted to slow down and savor every minute of the night and make sure she knew she was cherished.

Tara lifted herself to him, wrapping her legs around his waist and thrusting pleadingly towards him. “Don’t tease, Duncan.” Her voice was breathless, fading off into an urgent groan.

She stretched against the sheets, her hands moving restlessly. His body tensed at her sensual motions. She was beautiful, her skin flushed with passion, her eyes sparkling with demand. She began to whimper as he pushed deeper, and the sound of her half-whispered pleas and pants for more filled the room until he was buried in her.

“*Chère. Mon Dieu*, how you feel around me. So tight, so hot.” She fit him as though she were made for him, every sweet inch of her pussy clinging to his shaft. Her sweet, sexy cries were driving him wild. His heart pounded when her pussy clenched around him, and his control vanished. Lying over her until they were hip-to-hip, he began to thrust.

Tara wrapped her legs around him, her heels digging into the skin at the small of his back. She moved with him, her body vibrating with all the explosive energy she’d contained during her show. Palming her ass, he lifted her higher. He flexed his hips, adjusting his stroke so that his cock rubbed through the tender folds that sheltered her clit with each thrust.

He could smell her excitement now, the musky sweetness of her cream filling his senses and driving him crazy as her body neared climax. She dug her nails into his shoulders and he relished the bite of pain, clung to the knowledge he’d driven her to mark him. He thrust harder, felt her body tense under his and then spasm as she screamed her climax against his neck.

“Tara.” His voice was guttural, so raw he didn’t recognize it as his own. Hard, fast, he drove his cock into her pussy until the sounds of wet flesh slapping against wet flesh drowned out even the sound of the blood pounding in his ears. The greedy rippling of her cunt as she unraveled beneath him was too much.

“*Mi aime jou.*” The words poured from his heart and his mouth as his body found release. His body spasmed through the violent climax, and he felt her shuddering along with him, watched her eyes widen as she flew again over the crest.

With a sigh, he lowered his forehead to rest against hers, letting their breath mingle as they slowly returned from the edge of oblivion. He was shaken to his core, afraid to lose her, not selfish enough to ask her to stay. The past twenty-four hours had shown him that living without Tara was like sleepwalking through life. Staring down into her eyes, he tried to think of a way to stop tomorrow from coming.

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Chapter Eleven

Tara snuggled deeper into Duncan's arms, his words echoing in her ears. *Mi aime jou*. I love you.

They reached into her heart and stole her breath away.

There had been a yearning look on his face when he said them. As though he'd seen past tonight to tomorrow and was already saying his goodbyes.

Not this time.

"Did you mean it?" Using the hand on his chest as a support, she pushed herself up and sat beside him, enjoying the way his eyes popped open in surprise.

"Of course I meant it." The lines beside his mouth deepened as he frowned. For a man who had just said he loved her, he looked decidedly unhappy. If she weren't determined to settle this before she had time to second guess herself, she would have enjoyed kissing a smile back onto his face.

"And what are you planning to do about it?"

"Do about it?" He watched her, uncertainty written across his face. "Damn it, Tara. It isn't like I have a playbook for this." If he'd looked unhappy before, he looked positively grim now, his eyes narrowed to slits above his harshly clenched jaw.

She refused to feel sorry for him. He'd been the one who had told her goodbye, not the other way around. The fool had done this to himself. To them.

"I didn't know it took a playbook to tell someone you love them. Most people usually manage to just speak their hearts in a situation like this."

“But you aren’t most people, are you, Tara?”

“I’m not ‘most people’? What does that even mean? I have two arms, two legs. Two eyes that see you trying to pretend you don’t care if I leave. A heart that you broke a long time ago and a memory that won’t let me forget you.”

“And a voice that made you a star.”

“Is that what I’m supposed to think this is about? My success? You pushed me away well before I was anything near successful. Damn it, I hadn’t even gone out for the first meeting with Thomas yet and you were already telling me goodbye, good luck and don’t let the door hit you on the way out. That’s a funny way of loving someone, you jerk.”

The familiar pain stabbed through her heart, accompanied by the empty sense of loss that made her stomach clench. Why did it still have to hurt, even after so many years?

“*Mais*, what else was I supposed to do? Ask you not to go? Keep you running from one side of the country to the other, wasting time and energy you couldn’t afford to waste by trying to be here with me? You had a whole new world opening up to you out there. What kind of love would that have been, if I’d held you back when you stood at the door to your future?” The flatness of his voice caught her attention. The pain in his eyes caught her heart.

“So that is why you told me goodbye. Is that what this has all been about? You making the honorable gesture, putting my future ahead of your happiness?”

“Someone had to. You busted your butt since you were old enough to get on that stage to make something happen, to have something more than a life singing to drunks in bars and living in a rundown apartment in the Quarter.”

Fury joined the emotions churning in her gut. “You idiot. Who gave you the right to make that decision for me? To sit here feeling noble for five years, telling yourself that you did it all for me, wallowing in your sacrifice as if it was the only choice you could have made? That’s not honor, Duncan, that’s stupidity.”

“That’s love, Tara! Wanting what is best for the person you care for, even if it means you have to take a step back so they can have it.” He reached for her hand, then dropped his fists by his side when she jerked to her feet and stepped away to pace the floor. “Do you think you would have gotten where you are today if you had stayed here? You know as well as I do there’s no way it would have happened. Whatever I gave up was worth it to know you were happier there than you would have been here with me.”

His voice was bleak, raw with his own pain even when he was trying to soothe her own. Knowing he’d been hurting as much as she had made it easier to tell him the truth.

“You’re wrong if you think I was happier there.” Her mind spun, digging for the words to make him understand. “Singing was important to me, is important to me. It’s the one thing I had when I didn’t have much else. But it isn’t everything.”

“I wouldn’t expect it to be everything. I hoped you’d find happiness with your success, friends to share it with.” His mouth was set in a grim line that told her he still didn’t really get it.

“How did you think I would be happy when I left my heart behind?”

She stepped back to the bed, nerves jangling as she prepared to bare her soul.

“Do you know why I came to the club last night? Ever since my manager set up tonight’s show, all I could think of was one thing. Seeing you again. Hearing your voice, finding out how you’d been. As soon as I

found out I was coming back to New Orleans every voice I heard on the street sounded like yours, every damn face in the crowd looked like you. It got so bad that I couldn't sleep without dreaming of you."

"You dreamed of me?" He seemed cautiously pleased to hear it.

She drew in a shuddering breath. "Maybe a time or two. So when I came through that door last night, I wasn't just here to seduce you."

"You did a damn good job of it anyway, *chère*."

"I wanted to get you out of my system. I told myself I could replace the old memories with new ones, and end it with me being the one who said goodbye this time when it was over. I was trying to forget you."

"Fine. I hope this has helped you put the ghosts of the past to bed then." She'd never seen his eyes so cold, seen him shut down his emotions until no hint of the Duncan she knew could be seen. She plowed on, refusing to stop now.

"Then I saw you. Kissed you, talked to you, made love with you. I saw you watching me during the show, saw the pride on your face, the loneliness in your heart. And I realized why you still haunted my thoughts, why I wanted you so much that no matter how many miles were between us I couldn't get you out of my head. Because I still love you. I never stopped loving you. I love you." Her voice wasn't quite steady as she gave him the words, and she blinked back the emotional tears that threatened to fall.

Duncan sat up in bed, reaching again for her hand. This time she let him take it.

"I told myself I would be able to let you go again," he said. "That I couldn't hold you back, wouldn't beg you to stay."

She fell in his lap with a startled grunt when he pulled her hand. Then his mouth devoured hers in a kiss that stole her breath and claimed her

heart. Eagerly, she pressed herself to him, joy swelling as he clutched her against him.

Taking a deep, shaky breath she pulled back enough to see him clearly. There was no mistaking the tenderness in his gaze, the love on his face.

“*Mi aime jou*, Tara. I love you.” The simple words she’d thought she would never hear him say again filled her heart.

She threw her arms around his neck, afraid for a moment that if she let him go it might all slip away like one of her dreams. Instead she felt his arms tighten around her in response, holding her tighter.

“I told my manager last night not to expect to hear from me for a few days, and not to book anything else in my schedule without talking to me first.”

“How did she take it?” He kissed his way down her cheek, leaving a tingling trail of heat where his lips had been. Tara tilted her chin until her mouth lined up to his, and for a long moment she allowed herself to forget about anything but Duncan’s very talented tongue and the shivers he could draw from her.

“My life in LA has been all work and no play for a very, very long time. I think I’m overdue to make some changes in that pattern.”

“I’ve got a few good ideas when it comes to play.” He nibbled at her chin, teasing a giddy snicker from her.

“I bet you do.” He traced erotic circles around the sensitive peaks of her nipples.

“And I’ve got a property agent who’s been nagging me to look at some locations on the West Coast that he thinks might be a good spot for my next club. It seems the people out there like to drink and dance just as much as they do around here.”

“Seriously? Duncan, that’s wonderful.”

“Knowing I will be near you makes that idea sound a lot more intriguing.”

The bells from St. Louis Cathedral began to toll, the sound ringing across the other noises of night in the French Quarter.

“Hear the bells? It’s midnight. Last chance to make your Christmas wish, *chère*.” Duncan held her close as he fell back into the bed, taking her with him.

Tara brushed a kiss over his lips and snuggled into his body. “My Christmas wish already came true this year. There’s nothing I want but you.”

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About the Author

Ember Case was born in Louisville, Kentucky, the second of five children. Life in a large family taught her that everyone is the hero in their own life story.

After attending college in the Deep South and working in the IT department at a Fortune-500 corporation, she traded in her business suits and heels for jeans and bare feet. Today, in addition to her writing career, Ember is a graphic artist lucky enough to work from home, and has been a small-business owner for over 15 years. She has spent most of her life in the South, from Kentucky to Alabama, and now lives with her husband and their two children near the sandy beaches in Florida.

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Falling in love is the last thing on his busy agenda...but compromising positions can lead just about anywhere.

Compromising Positions

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David Strong knows how to do a lot of things—run an international fitness company, finesse stock portfolios and stay out of emotional entanglements. That is, until he gets tangled up with Sophie Delfino and her Sensational Sex workout. He’s supposed to help her demonstrate Kama Sutra positions for her couples’ yoga class. The rigorous postures require more than just physical control. And his co-instructor unexpectedly tests his control to the limit.

Sophie’s been fantasizing about David since her teens, but she never dreamed she’d actually be expected to run through her intimate desires—with an audience! The class is very professional, tame even—or it would be, if she’d been in any of the positions before. But she hasn’t—except in her wildest fantasies about David. Sophie knows she wants David in every way, and she’s flexible enough to use whatever she has to get him.

David can’t afford any unexpected distractions. Besides the sensual positions he has to endure without embarrassing himself in public, there’s an embezzler stealing from his company. And then there’s Sophie—who is well on her way to stealing his well-guarded heart.

Warning: This is one exercise program you won’t need to consult your doctor before beginning...unless he’s hot and available for house calls. The Kama Sutra isn’t for the prudish or faint of heart, and neither is this story.

Enjoy the following excerpt for: Compromising Positions:

“Why are you here exactly?” She plugged the rest of her orange into her mouth to keep it from going permanently dry. The man had a body that made her want to learn how to carve marble. He was as big as a tree and as broad as a house. Even through his charcoal T-shirt she could see the definition in his wide chest. His biceps bulged beneath the hem of his sleeves. A package of lean muscle and brooding good looks that made her insides melt.

“I’m here because Craig asked me to fill in for him.” David’s voice echoed inside Sophie’s head. Her heart leapt around her ribcage. *No way.* She’d been mortified at the idea of demonstrating sexual positions with Craig, but with David? No way. She couldn’t do it. She’d die of embarrassment. Contorting herself into such suggestive positions with the man whose body she fantasized about every night. She could never. *Never.*

“Fill in for him?” Breathe in tranquility, exhale tension. Breathe in—

“There is some co-ed class that he and Daphne teach together. Sophie’s filling in for Daphne, and I’m supposed to fill in for Craig. If you could tell her I’m here that would be great.” David popped a handful of grapes into his mouth, his eyes never leaving the bowl of fruit.

Sophie’s gaze darted across the reception desk. She hadn’t bothered to ask if there were any messages after her Pilates group. There were never any messages. She ripped three pink notes off the desk.

Craig. Please call.

Craig. Use diagrams, he won’t be coming.

Craig. Found a replacement, David Strong.

She plopped down in the receptionist chair and rolled back toward a potted palm. Her stomach reeled.

As she looked up at David, the fear that swamped her was drowned by a much warmer sensation. *Why not?*

She was a professional after all. And she'd been in positions with him far more challenging than the ones they'd be demonstrating in class, even if it had only been in her dreams.

She knew more on the subject than she ever thought possible. Every move of each of the classes was diagramed on note cards Daphne had left. She just had to get through it one by one. Without thinking that this was the closest she had ever come to actually having sex.

He met her stare and grabbed an apple from the bowl. She laughed, harder this time. *So predictable.*

"What now?" He crunched into the Red Delicious.

"Nothing." Sophie tried to stifle her giggles and peeled a banana off the bunch.

"I know, the wedding." He looked pleased with himself, as if he'd just solved the mystery of life. "You wouldn't dance with me."

"That's me." Sophie peeled the banana halfway down and smiled at its phallic resemblance.

His eyes clouded over. He looked her up and down once more. When his eyes cleared, he cocked his head to the side. "Are you Sophie?"

"Two for two, ace." She bit the top off the banana. Was there a sexy way to eat a banana? She shook her head. She didn't care. Daphne had complained so often about Craig's womanizing best friend Sophie felt she knew him. Enough to know she wanted him to remain a fantasy. He was way too much for her limited experience to handle. The class would just flesh out her dreams a bit.

"I was expecting someone like Daphne." He devoured the rest of the apple. "Though the attitude should have been a clue."

Sophie shrugged. Let him think she hated him as much as Daphne did. It was much safer than him knowing the truth. She finished the last of the fruit

and tossed the peel in the wicker garbage basket. She lifted the basket so he could toss in his apple core.

He eyed her again. “I didn’t eat dinner. Are you going to laugh again if I eat another piece?”

“Depends on what you pick.”

His eyebrows lifted further up his forehead. Never taking his gaze off her, he grabbed another apple, almost daring her to comment.

She smiled. *Too easy.* Sophie rose from the chair and walked back to the office. She could feel him behind her. Right behind her. She stopped, laughing as the front of him bumped into the back of her. It was fun to tease him.

“Too easy,” she said aloud this time. Playing with him was too much fun to resist. She turned into the office she shared with Daphne. Two desks faced each other in the middle of the small room. She perched on top of hers.

“What’s too easy?”

“Nothing.” She flipped through her cards. “What did Craig tell you about the class?”

“Not a thing.” David stood in the doorway, not quite entering the small office. “He just left a message on my voicemail. He wanted to stay with Daphne, but she was insisting he come to this class, so he needed a replacement. So what is it? Partnered stretching? I’m not the most flexible person.”

Sophie turned, hiding her face as she choked on her laughter. She should tell him. It wasn’t his fault he’d been set up for a most embarrassing situation. The temptation to see his face when he figured just what they’d be doing was big. But he could also run screaming and leave her humiliated in

front of the class. Better to prepare him and give him the option to run now, in private.

She picked up a binder and flipped through the pages until she came to the flyer. Turning the binder to him, she pointed. “This is the class.”

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“Okay,” David said slowly, handing the binder back to her. Just what had Craig gotten him into? His mind spun back to the voicemail message. The only thing he could recall was “Ask for Sophie. I trust you”. *Damn*. Craig trusted him not to use the class to make game with Daphne’s sister. The little sprite sitting on the desk. No problem. She was nowhere near his type. He’d probably break her in two.

“I’ll understand if you’re not comfortable enough with your sexuality to participate in the class.” Sophie’s fingers traced up and down the black sweats covering her thighs. The heavy fabric hung loosely around her, making her seem even smaller beneath it. “I can use diagrams if you want to back out.”

She was giving him an out. *Or was that a challenge?* “What makes you think I wouldn’t be comfortable?”

“The fruit,” Sophie answered quickly. Too quickly. Was she psychoanalyzing him because he was hungry?

“What are you talking about?” He watched her ample chest rise and fall as she took a deep breath. She wasn’t very proportional.

“Instant gratification.” Dimples pressed into her full cheeks and her teeth gleamed in the fluorescent lighting.

He sat down in an office chair. Funny, with him sitting in a chair and her on the desk they were almost eye-to-eye. It was those eyes that had made him ask her to dance at Craig and Daphne’s wedding. They’d pulled at him all during the ceremony, pierced right through him. She must have been standing on a box or in some very high heels because he would have remembered she was this short.

“You’ve lost me.” David shook his head and looked down at her feet. They were bare, except for a coat of crimson polish and a silver toe ring on her right foot. Even her feet were miniature. They had to be smaller than the palms of his hands.

“Grapes are the ultimate in instant gratification. Fast, easy sweetness. No mess afterwards. Apples are next. Just a core to discard.”

He tossed his head to the side. She had to be joking. “So you think what fruit I like to eat tells about me sexually.”

“Yes.” Her voice rang in triumph. She flipped through the cards she held.

Refusing to be goaded, he scooted closer, trapping her against the desk. When he heard her gasp, he smiled. “Or maybe you just want me to think about what oranges and bananas say about you, sexually.” Two could play at this little game.

She drew in a ragged breath. “That I take my time to get what I want? Go ahead and think about that.”

Her feet found the chair between his legs, and she pushed him back, hard. Propelling him into the opposite wall. She jumped down and was out the door before he could even get to his feet.

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The cards have been dealt, but the game's just begun...

Play Me

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Proving her worth to her male-dominated family didn't include being forced to bet herself in a high-stakes poker game. But to save the family business and protect her father's health, Nina Avalon is prepared to do anything. Even agree to a scandalous wager with a ruthless tycoon.

Sicilian billionaire Raul Stregone has revenge on his mind. When the opportunity to ruin the family who destroyed his drops in his lap, Raul plans to wreak his vengeance via the boardroom—and the bedroom—with the daughter of his adversary. Yet while he may have won her fair and square, it soon becomes apparent that she's not going down without a fight.

But let her wrangle all she wants. One way or another, he plans on collecting his winnings.

Warning: contains a sexy Sicilian hero whose carefully constructed veneer comes off with his shirt, a heroine who doesn't believe in coming quietly, and a balustrade by an Italian lake that might blush if it were able.

Enjoy the following excerpt for: Play Me

His accent was stronger, as if the polished veneer had slipped, allowing a glimpse of the fighter beneath. Nina drew in a breath, resisting the urge to move back against the force of potent energy emanating across to her. "I simply want you to reconsider."

"Your brother made a deal with me. He lost."

"Now you intend making my whole family suffer."

His laugh was mocking, sardonic. "You will hardly suffer, *cara*."

Cara. It sounded sexy and erotic offered in that deep, gravelly tone flavored with the accent of his homeland.

Nina shifted in her chair, her pulse skipping. “My brother had no right to gamble a percentage of our company. This was a private undertaking between the two of you, and involving our company was not Carl’s decision to make. Besides, my father has to be consulted about any business affecting the company.”

“Then I’ll consult with him.”

“No!”

Heads turned at Nina’s outburst. Mortified, she looked back at Raul. “There’s no reason to involve my father.” No reason to batter his already weakened heart with further stress. “I’m my father’s representative in this matter, you can deal with me.”

He sat back, the polished demeanor restored as the corners of his mouth flickered. “A pleasant enough prospect.”

“Perhaps I should warn you not to underestimate *me*.”

He sipped his drink and then lowered the glass. “I have a suggestion.”

Oh, she bet he had. “Which is?”

“Another wager. Of a more personal and mutually pleasurable nature.”

When his gaze flickered over her in an insultingly suggestive manner, icy fingers walked down her spine. There was absolutely no mistaking the nature of this prospective wager, even without the provocative curve of his full mouth and the sultry gleam in his eyes.

She huffed. “I don’t think so.”

“Very well. I’ll speak with your father first thing tomorrow.”

Her stomach pitched, but she refused to take the bait. “I don’t respond to blackmail.”

“Not blackmail, surely.” He steepled his fingers. “Business.”

“Whatever. You think you can manipulate me into getting what you want.”

“You don’t know what I want. Yet.”

“I have a pretty rough idea.”

“You flatter yourself.” Although his predatory look indicated she was bang on target. “My priority right now is achieving payment of a debt. As much as I’d enjoy you in my bed, business comes first.”

As sensation tingled across her skin, hot on its heels came the question—why on earth would he be interested in her? He was a player on the world’s stage, so far out of her orbit it wasn’t funny. He had affairs with top models, actresses, royalty. Not studious types in the middle of a master’s degree with their hearts set on a key place in the family business.

Despite the way her body reacted, she wasn’t interested in him. For some women he might be dangerously appealing with his tanned skin, seductive eyes and muscled physique—not to mention a rapier mind that no doubt dipped into whatever the hell subject it fancied and came out an expert. To her he was simply another man who ruthlessly pursued whatever he wanted, and she’d had more than enough experience of his sort.

What she wanted—needed—was a steady sort of man, reasonable and unassuming, who would treat her as an equal partner. Not another arrogant, demanding, give-me-what-I-want-when-I-want-it type who thought the world revolved around him.

What she didn’t need was the man who wrote the book on arrogance currently sitting opposite her with an imperious smile on his admittedly lush mouth.

Dragging her attention away from his mouth, she focused on the potential disaster looming as they failed to reach a compromise. “It’s good

to know business comes first for you. At least that's something we agree on. For me it comes first, last and always. I've no interest in anything else."

"Which is undoubtedly where we differ. I have an interest in many things." His gaze swept once more along her mouth, lingering there for excruciating moments until it returned to meet hers. "But I digress. Allow me to outline my proposal to benefit us both."

Proposal? There was a proposal? She was still recovering from his sultry perusal of her mouth. She shifted in her chair and cocked her head. "I'm all ears."

He studied her, as if weighing what little he could offer in return for as much as he could get.

"As I said, it involves another wager." He held up his forefinger as Nina sucked in a breath about to protest. "Should you win, I'll agree to discharge the current debt owed me in return for the property portfolio."

Relief shimmered through her, but such response was premature until she knew what she would have to forfeit if things didn't turn in her favor. "What if I don't win?"

He drew in a long breath, considering. Her heart started pumping. If Carl stood in front of her right now she would willingly strangle him. He should be the one offering up heaven knew what in exchange for liberation.

She should be home safe in Chelsea, putting the finishing touches to her latest assignment on market forces. Not facing off against Raul Niccolo Stregone. Damn and blast Carl for putting her in this position. Her brother had brushed aside her concern that she hadn't played in years, that she hadn't wanted to play in years. Poker was like riding a bike, he'd assured her. Once you learned you never forgot.

More like skating on thin ice, Nina mused as she willed back nausea. One plunge into the icy depths and you never wanted to take to the blades

again.

He was enjoying himself, Nina realized, watching Raul's sensuous mouth press against his glass. He was stalking, priming his opponent, ready for the attack.

Was he bluffing? Waiting to see if she caved? Folded? Merely having some fun at her expense? Maybe waiting for her to say, "Okay, let's have another wager," then he would laugh and say he was only joking. That he'd be taking the shares after all.

A waiter materialized again when Raul raised his hand. Watching Nina, he beckoned the waiter forward and whispered conspiratorially. Nina strained to hear, but the chatter around her and the nervous buzzing in her ears made it impossible.

With a nod, a deferential bow, the waiter hurried away.

Temper sliced over some of the anxiety as Nina realized he was making her sweat. "I assume at some stage you intend answering me. But obviously not until you've milked this for all it's worth. So go ahead. Have your fun. I'll wait."

His grin flashed fast and deadly. "You know as well as I do that when you have your opponent on the back foot, it's best to savor the moment. But again, I digress." He ran long fingers across his jaw. "If you accept the wager and lose, then I may still accept the property portfolio."

Another sweep of relief, but this time accompanied by the clang of warning bells. "You said *may*," Nina pointed out as tightness squeezed at her temples. "What else do you want?"

Those long fingers traced round and round the damn glass, mesmerizing her as they journeyed with a slow and treacherous rhythm. Panic rose, gripping her throat. She looked up. "What do you want?"

His hand stopped moving as his gaze pierced hers. “What do I want?” A marauding glint shimmered in his eyes. “I want you. For one month.”

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