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## Chapter One

I would have shot him then and there if I thought it would do any good, but Roger was such a troll the bullet would have bounced off his thick, ugly hide. Maybe poison...

Becky interrupted my pleasant daydream with a whack on my arm. "Okay, don't turn around and look," she said, "but a guy is staring at you. And he is *hot!*"

"How nice for him."

All I needed to cap off this fabulous evening was Becky's matchmaking. I knew her taste. He probably wore chains and had a Mohawk. Becky herself was dressed in what was best described as slightly toned-down punk, not exactly your typical high school chemistry teacher garb. It went with her spiky hair, which she wore bleached and dyed silver, though a red fringe had been added in honor of the holidays. I should mention that she is Korean, so the dye job isn't exactly subtle. The headmaster turns a blind eye to this display of "personal expression" because she's a first-rate teacher and, at twenty-seven, cheap.

Around us, hip twenty-somethings in denim and black sipped cappuccinos and talked knowledgeably about the band that was setting up in the bar area. But we weren't sitting with them. *We* were at a long rectangular table in the back of the restaurant, where a small balding man in a hideous sweater was lecturing passionately about the insidious evil that was grade inflation. If I'd ever imagined a fate worse than death, this was it—the science department Christmas party.

Becky was staring over my shoulder and had started fanning herself vigorously with a dessert menu. "I mean really, really good-looking."

"Pass," I said from my slumped position. I seemed to have lost the will to sit up straight.

Becky tore her eyes away from the "hot man" long enough to look at me as if I were crazy.

"I'm off really good-looking men," I said.

"Oh please. That's such total bullshit."

"I'm not kidding." And I wasn't, not really. "Extremely good-looking men are always horribly deficient in other areas—you know, like kindness, consideration... It's like they get by on their looks and don't develop a personality." I threw my balled-up napkin on the table. "Either that or God put all their eggs in one basket—they're hot but they're stupid." The last thing I needed after an evening of Roger, our pompous gasbag of a department chair, was to deal with another overblown ego.

"Ouch. Sounds like someone has some old boyfriend issues to work out."

“Already have. Lesson learned – don’t date extremely hot men.”

Carol had stopped trying to make her sliver of chocolate cake last longer than Moses was lost in the desert, and was following our discussion interestedly from her position between us at the foot of the table. Unlike Becky, Carol looked like a high school science teacher. She was in her mid-thirties with long dark brown hair and the weight of a few too many faculty meeting doughnuts pooling about her waist.

Carol leaned forward. “You know, Jo has a point.” Her brown eyes glittered behind her sensible gold-rimmed glasses as she warmed to her topic. “They’ve done studies that show very good-looking people actually do not tend to be as well developed in other areas – uh...”

Her words shriveled and died under the heat of Becky’s glare. “Live a little, Jo! We didn’t pick this place for the food, you know.” *Ah.* That explained why we were eating at this unexpectedly trendy club a few blocks outside the gentrified section of downtown Long Beach.

“I still can’t believe you talked him into this,” Becky said.

Carol gave her a stern look over the top of her glasses. “I told him it was rated one of the best restaurants in Long Beach, and it is. I just didn’t tell him what for.” Her pursed lips twitched and then widened into an evil grin that was the duplicate of Becky’s. It looked strange on her sweet face.

“In another hour, the Jungle Cranks will be playing, and this place will look like any other club,” Becky said with a dreamy smile. “Roger is going to pitch a fit when he sees it.”

That just tells you how clueless Roger is. He probably didn’t even know there *were* restaurants outside of Denny’s. “I’d like to see Roger pitch a fit,” I said, beginning to look forward to the evening for the first time. I glanced at my watch and stifled a yawn; it was getting close to my normal bedtime. “I guess I could stay for another hour or so.”

“I’m beginning to think you may be beyond help,” Becky said.

Carol shook her head in silent agreement.

“Hey, what are you ganging up on me for?” I said.

Becky scowled. “Well, look at you. Tonight’s outfit’s not so bad – that skirt shows off your long legs and your sweater’s actually in fashion this year and not two sizes too big for you for once – but what’s with all the Dockers and Oxford shirts and little matching sweaters you wear to work? I mean you’re what, twenty-four?”

I hesitated and then corrected her. “Twenty-two.” I didn’t like to talk about my age. The last thing I needed was for my eighth-grade students to learn I had only nine years on them. My lips curved up in a sudden smile as I recalled that I was about to have two whole weeks away from them.

Becky’s scowl deepened. “You’re twenty-two,” she said. “You dress like a thirty-five-year-old soccer mom.”

“I do not! I just dress more conservatively than you do.”

“No, Becky’s right,” Carol said, eyeing my outfit. “What you’re wearing now really is much more age-appropriate. Not that I blame you.” She smiled. “I did the same thing when I was your age.”

I was trying to work out if she was on my side or Becky’s, when Becky attacked my hair. Literally. “Ouch!” I cried, slapping her hand away.

“And what’s with the granny bun all the time, for crying out loud?” She examined the bobby pin she’d taken from my hair as if it were a rare artifact. “I’d kill for hair like yours, and you hide it away.”

I glared at her and rubbed the tender spot on my scalp. “I wear it up because it gets in the way and tickles my face. But I’ll wear it down for you tonight. Happy?” I pulled out the rest of the pins and thick red-gold waves tumbled to the middle of my back. I pretended not to notice as midway up the table, Bob stopped talking sports with Kendra long enough to watch my unintentional imitation of a shampoo commercial. According to the students, Bob’s the reigning HTOC (Hot Teacher On Campus). I suppose he’s attractive, if you like the beefy football player type. I didn’t.

Becky said, “Let me take you shopping and then I’ll be happy.”

I held out my hand for my hairpin.

“All right.” She sighed and handed it back. “It’s Christmas. I’ll back off. For now. Will that do?”

“Fine.” I said it to keep the peace, but there was no way I was ever going shopping with her. My goal at work was to be inconspicuous. I didn’t think I’d help the cause by bearing my midriff or whatever was in fashion just now. As a five-foot-ten redhead, I had a hard enough time as it was. You can probably guess what my nickname was growing up. No, not Ariel of *The Little Mermaid* fame. Think more vegetable. And, though my mother says my eyes are a romantic green, they look like plain old hazel to me. So, in sum, giant, hazel-eyed carrot.

Becky reached for the nearly empty margarita pitcher and snuck a glance behind me as she topped off our glasses. “Hot man, still heating up the room, still checking you out.”

“Still not looking.” I slumped further in my chair. If I sank any lower, I’d be under the table. “Besides, what happened to waiting until Roger goes home before starting the real party?” I said, trying to put her off before she did something awful, like wave him over to join us.

Becky opened her mouth to object, but I cut her off. “I’m not about to willingly provide fodder for the Bayshore gossip hotline.” That at least was true. Schools are gossip pits without equal. If I showed any interest in a man, and I mean the *slightest* bit, the rumor mill would have us engaged by the time school started up again. It’s like that children’s game “telephone”. But instead of a phrase getting humorously distorted as it passes from person to person—Jo met a man; Jo met a can; Jo ate a can—the story gets cruelly embellished on each pass—Jo met a man; Jo and a man were holding hands; Jo

and a man were making out in the parking lot; Jo and a man were buck-naked in the backseat of a Porsche having wild sex that's banned in ten states.

"Really, Jo," Carol said. "You shouldn't let other people keep you from living your life. People are going to talk about you one way or another." She twisted around in her chair to get a look at the mystery man for herself. Her eyes widened. "It might as well be for a good cause," she said. Then she sighed. I stared at her. Carol? Happily married, motherly Carol, sighing over another man? Who was this guy? I looked doubtfully at the icy liquid in my glass and wondered sourly if they'd put something in the margaritas.

Then I caved.

Pretending I was checking out the band, I shifted around in my chair. "Hot" did not do the man justice. He was the most fabulous-looking man I'd ever seen, and that includes Johnny Depp as a pirate and Brad Pitt in *Fight Club*. He was leaning against a nearby wall, a still figure in black, as distinct as silence in a crowd. Most of the men in the place were dressed in black, but for them it was a statement, a uniform, a pick-up line. This man belonged in it.

Flickering lights from the dance floor slid over his chiseled features, briefly illuminating strong cheekbones before getting lost in the dark hollows below. He had one of those long, lean bodies, with just the right amount of muscle, and dark, slightly wavy hair that hung to his shoulders in a way that made my stomach lurch.

As if sensing my regard, he suddenly turned his head from the shadows and looked directly at me. I did an embarrassing deer-in-the-headlights thing and our eyes locked. His eyes were the most gorgeous blue I'd ever seen. I mean piercingly blue. Meltingly blue. A sharp desire to be closer to him slammed me like a wave.

With an effort, I turned back around, but I could feel his eyes burning into mine as acutely as if he were still in front of me.

Carol didn't say anything. She just stared at him with a goofy smile on her face, her glasses misting softly. Becky had stopped fanning herself and had settled in for the night of viewing too, planting her elbow on the table and resting her head in her palm. I pushed her elbow out from under her chin and she nearly smacked her chin on the tabletop. She blinked her kohl-lined eyes a few times and grinned sheepishly at me. "Not bad, eh?"

I didn't respond. I couldn't—I hadn't yet regained proper speaking powers.

"You should go talk to him," Becky said, giving me a nudge.

"In front of everyone?" I said. "You've got to be joking." My legs felt like jelly. I gave myself a shake. I was being ridiculous, overreacting. Becky was right. If this was my response to the first good-looking man I saw, I really *did* need to get out more.

"Please. There's smart, and then there's stupid," Carol said, coming up for air. "You're going to let Roger and a bunch of old gossipy biddies keep you from a man like that?"

Carol was right. It was time I showed a little backbone. “Not when you put it that way,” I said. I risked a glance back in his direction. He was watching the band, giving me a good look at his profile. It was gorgeous too.

Too gorgeous, actually. Sanity returned. I turned around more firmly in my chair.

“Go on.” Becky gave me another little push.

I didn’t budge. “No way,” I said. “There’s something wrong with him.”

“What? What is wrong with him?” Carol demanded.

“He’s boring, he’s vain, he has six wives in various countries, he lives in a yurt with fifteen Chihuahuas, he sells deodorant for a living—I don’t know, but I stand by my theory. No one can be *that* good-looking *and* have a personality.”

“Oh, for goodness sake!” Carol said. “What a load of crap!”

Becky gave her a stunned look at this unexpected reversal of argument. Carol never backed off something that had been written up in *Scientific American*.

Carol continued, on a roll now. “Stop inventing reasons to avoid talking to him. If you want to forgo meeting fabulous men to sit here with the likes of us for the rest of your life, be my guest.” Her glasses had slid down her nose and she glared over the top of them at me.

“What she said,” Becky said. “Though I don’t know why you’d even care if he has *thirty* wives and *eats* deodorant for a living. You don’t need to have him around for scintillating conversation—look at him! He’s so hot he doesn’t need a personality. What do you want to talk to him for anyway?”

“Gotta love liberated women,” I muttered. “Equal opportunity chauvinism.”

Becky jiggled the empty margarita pitcher. “Now stop yer stalling and go get us another. And while you’re there, talk to the man. No, wait. You’ll chicken out. I’m going with you.”

“Oh, no, what are you doing?” I squeaked as she pulled me up from the table. Roger sent us an irritated frown and I responded with the look all females possess instinctively, the one that says “ladies’ room”. He cleared his throat and turned away. Unfortunately now I was committed, at least to a trip to the bathroom.

“If you think I’m going to just march up to him and talk to him, you’re wrong,” I said in Becky’s ear as she propelled me out of the alcove. Becky was more forward with men than I was. A lot more forward.

To my relief—and maybe just a *tiny* bit of disappointment—the man in black had disappeared. This didn’t stop Becky. She took an iron grip on my arm and steered us toward the bar through the dense band of people who sat five and six around tiny tables near the dance floor. When we reached the packed bar area, its wooden floor already tacky with spilled drinks, she paused and looked around. “Oh good, he’s right over there.”

My backbone deserted me. She gave my arm another tug, but I dug in my heels. “I don’t *think* so,” I said.

"Don't worry." She spoke soothingly, as to a nervous dog, "We're just going to the bar for another pitcher. And when we get near him, I'll just give you a little push into him."

"Becky, don't you dare! That is so high school."

"Shhh." She dropped behind me and fastened her fingers lightly on my waist.

I stopped and turned around to face her. "I mean it, Becky, don't you dare."

She gave a disappointed sigh. "Spoilsport. All right. Fine. Scout's honor." She held up her hands in a mixed gesture of supplication and Scout salute.

I sighed. "I will talk to him *later*, Becky. I promise. The second Roger's gone, okay? I'm not that stupid."

"All right, all right."

"Now, can we go back to the table?"

Her dark eyebrows disappeared up under her spiky red bangs. "Of course not. We have to get that pitcher while we're here, or Hot Man will think you came over just to get a closer look."

"Oh, for crying out loud."

"C'mon." She pushed me in the direction of the bar, holding on to me as if I might do a bunk. Which I would have, had we not been boxed in by the crowd.

I ignored the man in black and fixed my attention on a random point behind the bar. It wasn't any sort of flirtatious coyness – I was legitimately embarrassed. I mean he had caught us staring at him, and now we were heading in his direction like lovesick groupies. Well, to the bar, really, but he didn't know that. As we were even with him, I felt Becky's hand leave my waist to tug my arm. Furious, I ignored her and pushed forward. She gave my arm another, stronger tug. As I half turned to tell her to knock it off, I was pulled off balance and spun around. But instead of frowning down into Becky's mischievous brown eyes, I was glaring at a man's chest. A very nicely built man's chest. I tilted my head up and met blue eyes, the blue of the night sky just before the sun totally disappears.

The censure for Becky died on my lips as I got lost a second time staring at the hot man.

His eyes crinkled slightly at the corners, and he broke the fraught silence with a simple hello. His voice was low and gravelly with an accent I couldn't quite place. It made my knees weak. I've always been a sucker for an accent. *Oh, no*. I was definitely in for some trouble with this one.

## Chapter Two

"I hope I didn't alarm you just now," said the man in black, "but you looked like you needed rescuing from your dinner party."

The kitschy disco ball above the adjacent dance floor started to spin, showering him in twinkling fragments of color as if gift-wrapping him in fairy dust. I felt a giggle bubble to the surface and ruthlessly tamped it down.

"You've come to save me from certain-death-by-boredom? How wonderful." I stretched out a hand. "I'm Jo. You must be Prince Charming. How nice to finally meet you."

"Not quite." His lips twisted briefly in a wry smile. "Will." His handshake was good and firm.

"Jo's an unusual name for a woman," he said.

"It's short for Josephine," I admitted. *Why had I told him that?* I never told *anyone* that. Even my bank knew me as "Jo".

The band had launched into a funky, ironic rendition of an old disco tune and the crowd around us surged with enthusiasm. I had to place a hand against the wall to keep my balance.

"It's getting a little crowded in here," Will said, raising his voice to be heard over the din. "Maybe we should go out to the back porch where we can talk?"

He pointed toward an open doorway at the back of the dance floor where a heavysset bouncer stood guard, but my attention was turned in the other direction.

Becky had scuttled back to our table. She and Carol were pointedly looking elsewhere and Roger was fully absorbed in whatever he was saying, but the rest of my colleagues were getting restless. Hunky Bob was pointing to the band with one beefy hand and Kendra's new blonde highlights glinted as her head swiveled to follow. After four hours of talking nonstop sports, they'd picked *now* to run out of things to bore people with?

I gave in to the inevitable. It was one thing to be talking to Will while waiting in line for the bar, quite another to be seen leaving with him. Even if it was only to the back porch.

As I opened my mouth to decline, a strong jab pushed me off-balance and I lost my footing. Will caught me and held me upright.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, thanks..."

He was holding me at a respectful distance, but really, twenty feet was too close to this man. His beautiful blue eyes had darkened with concern and I felt a strange recklessness. My nosy, gossipy co-workers could take pictures for all I cared.

"Maybe some air would be good," I said. The words seemed to tumble out on their own.

The crowd opened up for us as if by magic and Will steered me out into a relatively private nook another couple had vacated. The porch area was about the size of a four-car garage and enclosed by two-story tall cypress trees. It might have been claustrophobic but for a clever arrangement of potted green ficuses and red Japanese maples that divided the area into smaller, inviting alcoves. Everything was strung with those fat multi-colored bulbs that had been big in the Seventies. I'm sure the effect was supposed to be ironic or retro or something, but to me it just looked pretty and festive.

I knew all this because conversation had ceased between us and I was looking everywhere but at him. We were practically alone out there, and with this man I definitely needed a chaperone. I snuck a glance at Will from under my lashes. He seemed far away, an odd look on his face I couldn't interpret.

The silence became too much for me and I had to say something, anything—so long as it was witty, clever and engaging.

"I'm afraid I'm not very good at small talk," I said.

Jeez.

"That's all right, we don't need to talk." He gave me a lazy, slightly wicked smile that made me clutch the railing for support.

For some reason I couldn't explain—maybe I was on auto-stupid-pilot—I did the only thing that could make it worse. I launched into a long, unnecessary explanation.

"I've never been good at small talk; I never know what to say. That's why I usually avoid this sort of place. You're not supposed to discuss anything controversial, intellectual, or personal. Pretty much anything worth discussing is taboo. Why can't people talk about something interesting when they meet, like..." I threw up my hands. "I don't know, what book they're reading? Instead you're stuck with insipid and inane topics like the weather and *that* hardly varies in Southern California. Oh, never mind," I said, a little confused myself at how it had come out.

Will regarded me narrowly, as if I were a kitten that had suddenly sprouted horns, and took a step back. *Great.* Maybe, if I was lucky, the Earth would open up and swallow me whole.

When he finally spoke, it was the last thing I would have expected.

"If you cannot think of anything appropriate to say you will please restrict your remarks to the weather." Then he smiled, a genuine full-blown grin. I let out a breath I hadn't known I was holding and relaxed back against the railing.

"I see you know your Jane Austen. I suppose you saw the movie."

"I read the book, too."

"You're kidding, right?" I'd never met a man—a straight man anyway—outside the occasional English teacher forced to include Austen in his curriculum, who had read *Sense and Sensibility*, much less was willing to admit to it.

"Had sisters, growing up." He shrugged and lean muscles moved under his shirt.

"Tell me then, Jo, who finds small talk inane, have you read anything interesting lately?" He spoke nonchalantly but watched me keenly, as if my answer mattered.

All I could think of was the half-finished mystery on my nightstand and the pile of Regency romance novels I bought for a quarter at the library and hoarded in a pile under my bed for particularly nasty days. Judge me when you start teaching thirteen-year-olds.

"What genre?" I asked, stalling shamelessly.

His eyes took on a challenging glint. "I've been reading some intriguing works by Rousseau on the nature of society. But we can discuss whatever *genre* you like."

French philosophy? Great. *That's what you get for being such a babbling prude*, I told myself. No doubt it was karmic payback for my stupid theory about *his* intelligence. "Why don't we start with Jane Austen and work our way up to solving the world's problems."

I half expected him to turn away in disgust, but he laughed good-naturedly and we proceeded to discuss books. As he appeared to have read everything ever written, the conversation drifted all over the place. The enclosed porch filled and emptied several times, though I barely noticed the other people. We might have talked for ten minutes or ten hours.

I was lightly lampooning his theory that Utopia could exist outside the pages of literature when the conversation took an abrupt right turn.

"Do you believe in destiny?" he asked.

It was the worst pick-up line since "Hey, baby, what's your sign".

I didn't realize I'd said the words out loud until he gave a small shake of his head and said, "You misunderstand me. I'm asking whether you believe our lives are governed by fate or free will."

I let out a breath of relief. He hadn't turned into a freak on me, after all. "Free will," I said, "though it's less a well-formed philosophy than wishful thinking. If I didn't think I had some choice in what happens to me, I wouldn't want to get out of bed in the morning."

In reply, he muttered something in Latin.

A light bulb went off in my thick skull. Not that I understood Latin. I didn't. But I *was* familiar with people suddenly shifting into the dead language. I'd seen it at work a hundred times. My eyes narrowed. "You're an English teacher," I accused him.

"No."

"Philosophy? History?"

"No." He shook his head. "I just read a lot."

“What *do* you do then?”

The laughter seemed to fall from his face, and I wondered if I had inadvertently brought up a sore subject.

“I guess you could say I’m in...Human Resources Management. Nothing exciting. And yourself?”

“I teach middle school science, but my background’s in ecology.”

My degree is officially in biology, but I had loaded up on ecology classes because the labs were mostly held outdoors. I discovered early on that I much preferred wearing heavy boots and tromping around in mud to the more traditional latex glove and petri dish route. I liked studying outside so much that I’d signed up for astronomy and geology classes as well. Of course, there’s a price to pay for a self-indulgent education. Mine was that the only job I could find upon graduation was teaching earth science to eighth graders.

“Ecology,” Will said. “That’s a subject I know little about. I so rarely get out during the day. It’s only at night that I have the flexibility to study things that interest me.” His voice was flat, the animation I’d glimpsed earlier gone.

Great. In addition to being financially useless, my educational interests repelled men. I shifted the conversation back to books.

“I like to read Thomas Hardy novels at Christmas,” I said. “They’re so outrageously depressing that even if you have to spend your holiday hearing about your aging relatives’ medical issues, and then go home to find your tree on fire and all your presents stolen by pirates, you still can’t help but feel as if you’re having the best Christmas ever.”

This got him to laugh again and his eyes, lightened to a brilliant sapphire, met mine in shared amusement before the humor in them gave way to something else. My breath caught as he stepped slowly, purposefully, into the space that separated us. I was dimly aware that the band had started up again after a short break and the porch had emptied. Completely. We were alone out there.

He spoke in a low gravelly voice that intensified his faint accent. “You’re not at all what I expected.” He reached forward to capture a long lock of my hair and watched it slide slowly through his fingers as if mesmerized. “Gold and orange and red, like the sunrise.” He traced a finger lightly down my cheek. “You’re as lovely as daybreak.”

He closed the remaining distance between us.

I’m a “third date, first kiss” kind of girl but that night I didn’t care. Soon—too soon—he broke away abruptly and studied me for a long silent moment at arm’s length.

An odd mix of triumph and regret seemed to war across his face, but before I could decide what I’d seen or ponder what it meant, he pulled me tightly against him and I was lost once again in his kiss—until a sharp, ravaging pain jerked me out of my hormonal fog. I wrenched myself away and took a staggering step back. *What the hell did he think he was doing?*

He had bitten my neck.

Hard.

I wanted to yell for help, to give him an earful of what I thought about weirdoes who bit people, but the words froze on my lips. I just stood there staring wonderingly into his eyes, those blue, blue eyes as he pulled me toward him. I was terrified yet curiously unable to move away, as if I were in one of those dreams when you try to run and nothing happens. He pulled me closer, closer, and as his lips hovered an inch from mine, the simmering attraction between us caught fire again and I forgot about running away altogether. He lowered his teeth again to my neck and bit again.

The pain woke me partially out of my stupor and the years of self-defense classes my father had made me take kicked in, giving sudden strength to my limp legs. Almost automatically, I pulled a knee sharply up into his groin. He gave a startled cry and loosened his grip for a brief moment, but almost immediately grabbed my shoulders and yanked me back toward him. But the break had been enough. My mind cleared, as if someone had poured a bucket of cold water down over me.

Instead of resisting, I shifted toward him. It caught him off guard and he was forced to step back to keep his balance. I used the opportunity to crack an elbow into his jaw. It was all I needed. Clutching a hand to my throbbing neck, I ran blindly for the door back into the bar and ran smack into another hard chest. I let out a strangled scream.

The owner of the chest, a tall, brown-haired man with intense light grey eyes and a crooked nose, pushed me away and held me at arm's length. His eyes raked my face and seemed to linger at my neck, though I was sure he couldn't see what I could only imagine as the world's nastiest hickey, since my hand covered it.

"Are you okay?" His voice sounded harsh, urgent.

"I'm fine," I said. I forced myself to remain calm as I scanned the dining area urgently for Becky and Carol. They were still at the table, a half-full pitcher of margaritas between them. They didn't seem to have moved since I left them.

I realized the man was saying something to me. I brushed off his polite concern and hurried back to our table. Gathering up my long hair in one hand, I pulled the thick mass around my neck and let it hang down the front of my chest. I have a lot of hair. Anything on my neck that needed to be hidden would be.

Becky was waiting eagerly for a report. I bent to collect my purse. "I'm going to head home," I said.

"So soon?"

I pitched my voice louder and said to the group at large, "I'm sorry I have to leave early, but I'm not feeling too well. I think I'm coming down with something."

Becky's grin faded and her brow furrowed as she exchanged a glance with Carol.

Roger spoke portentously from the head of the table. "I'm not surprised. Many people, especially the new teachers, are only able to hold off a cold until the holidays."

His smug response got my back up, but now was not the time to deal with Roger.

Carol was watching me with a concerned look. "I'll drive you," she said, standing up. "I'm parked just down the block."

I forced myself to speak lightly. "No, you stay and have fun. I'd planned to take a taxi anyway—it's only ten bucks, I live so close." It was only a partial lie—I definitely planned to take one now. After a few more minutes of saying goodbye to everyone and fending off offers of company I didn't want for the ride home, I managed to escape. I wasn't kidding when I'd said I felt crappy. My neck hurt, my stomach was churning with a potent combination of disgust and tequila, and the room was starting to spin. Fortunately, a taxi was waiting outside the restaurant and the driver handed me neatly inside.

I managed to give him my address before slipping into darkness in the backseat.